

# THE Atlantic

NOVEMBER 2004

## WELCOME TO THE GREEN ZONE

THE AMERICAN BUBBLE IN BAGHDAD  
BY WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE

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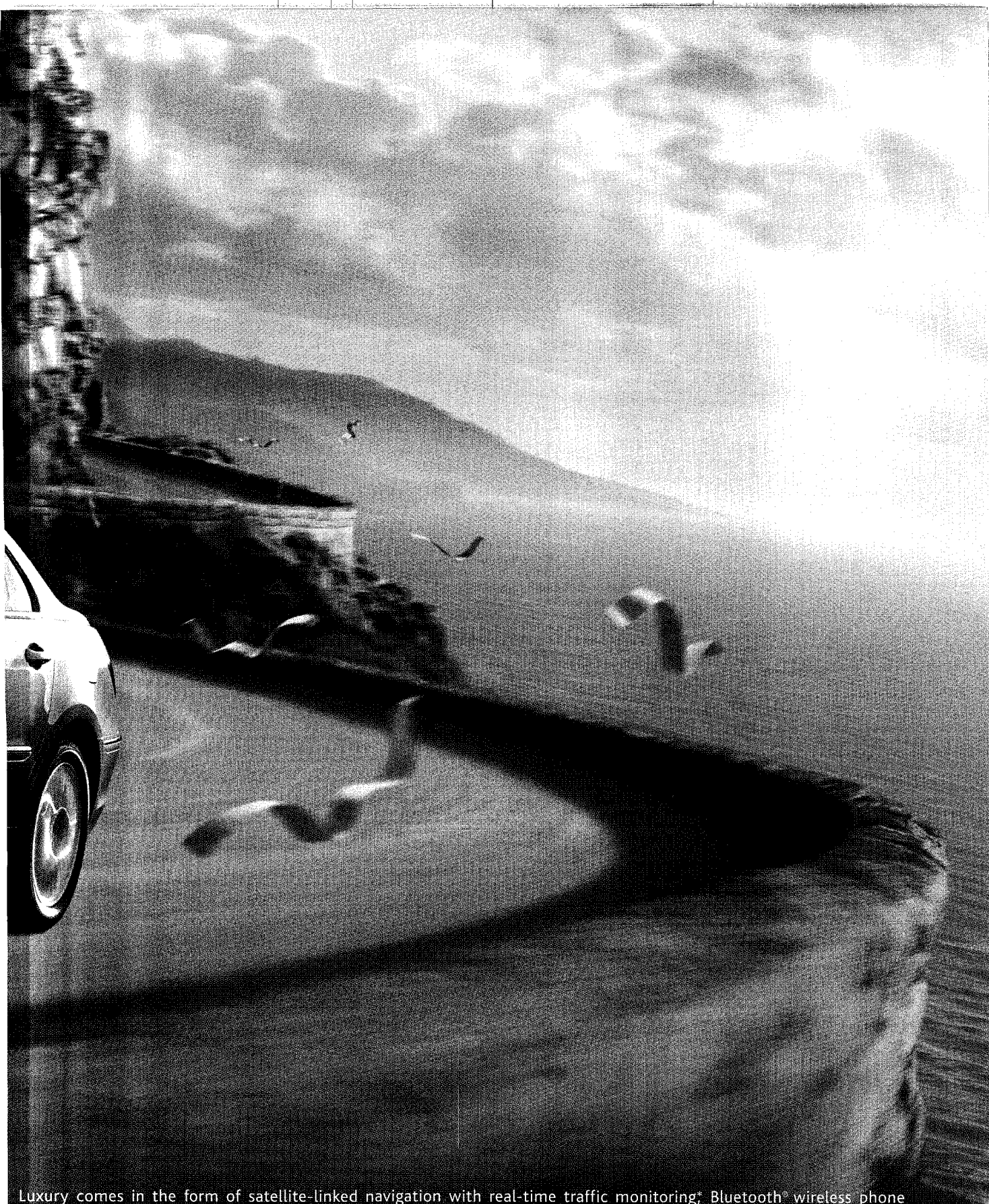
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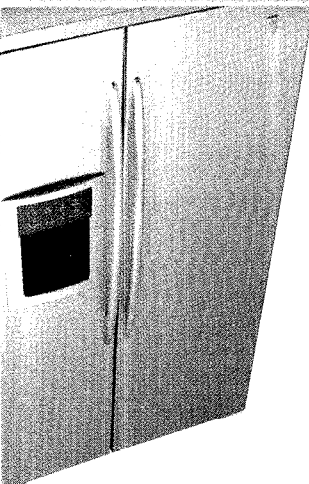


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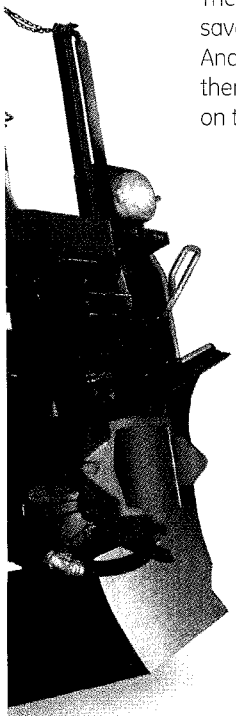
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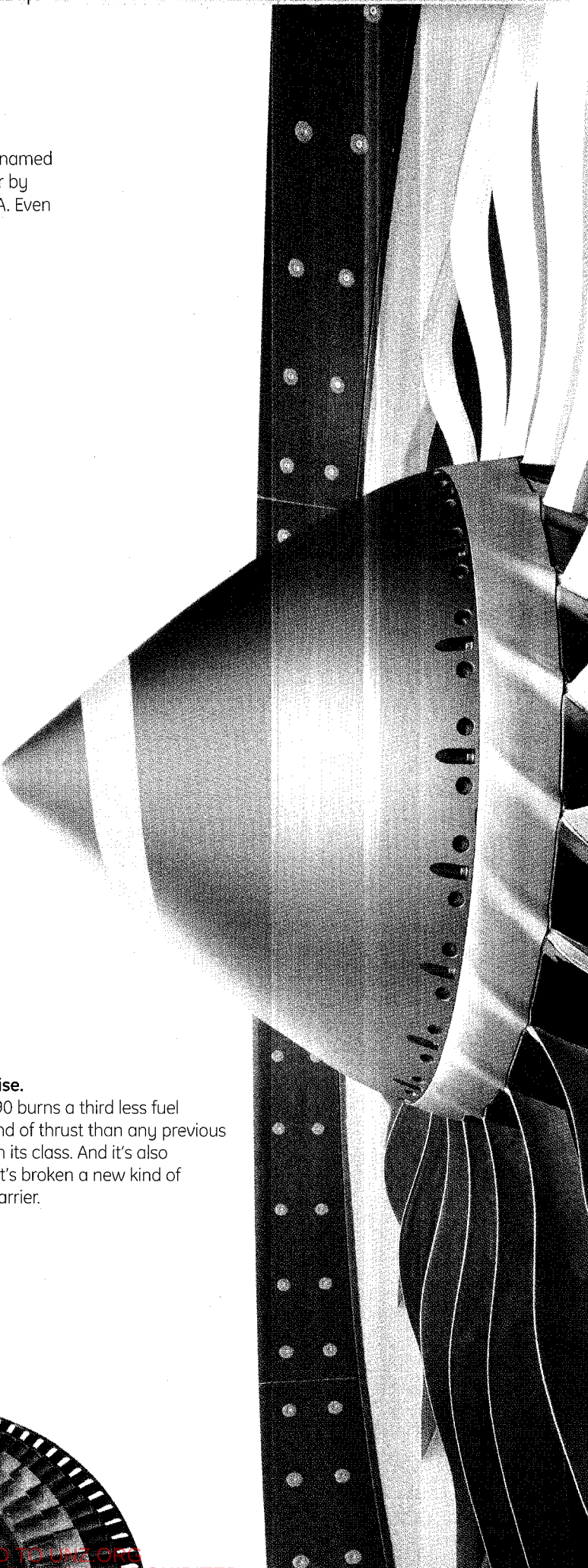
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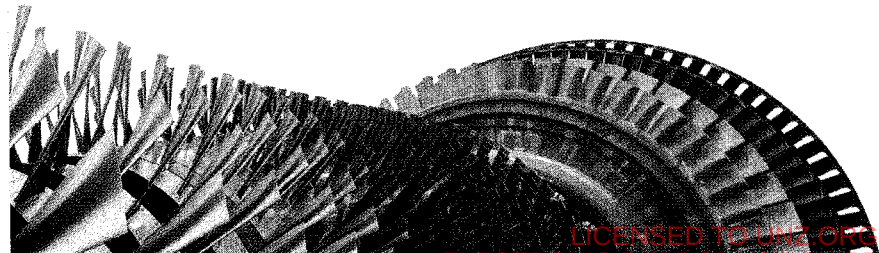
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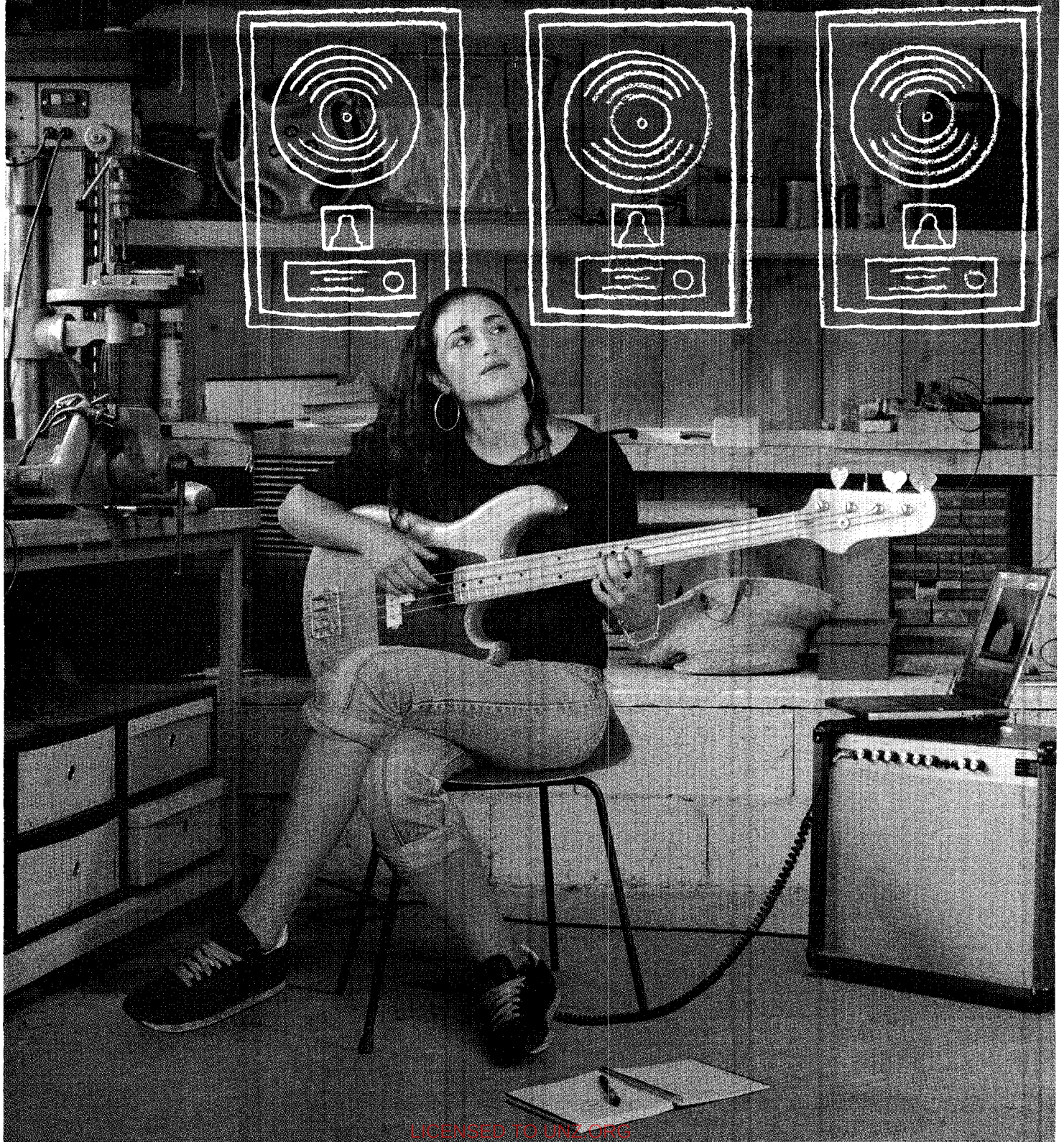
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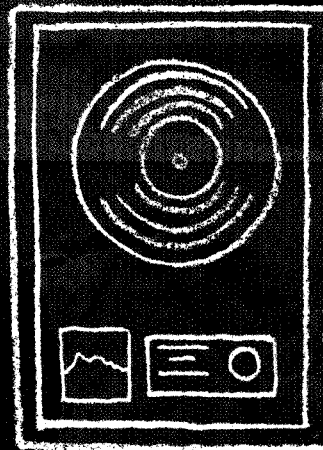
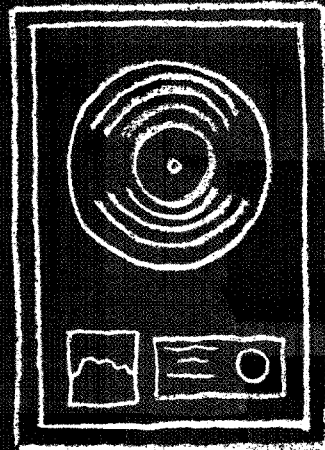
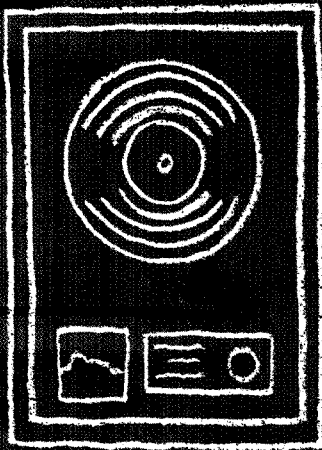






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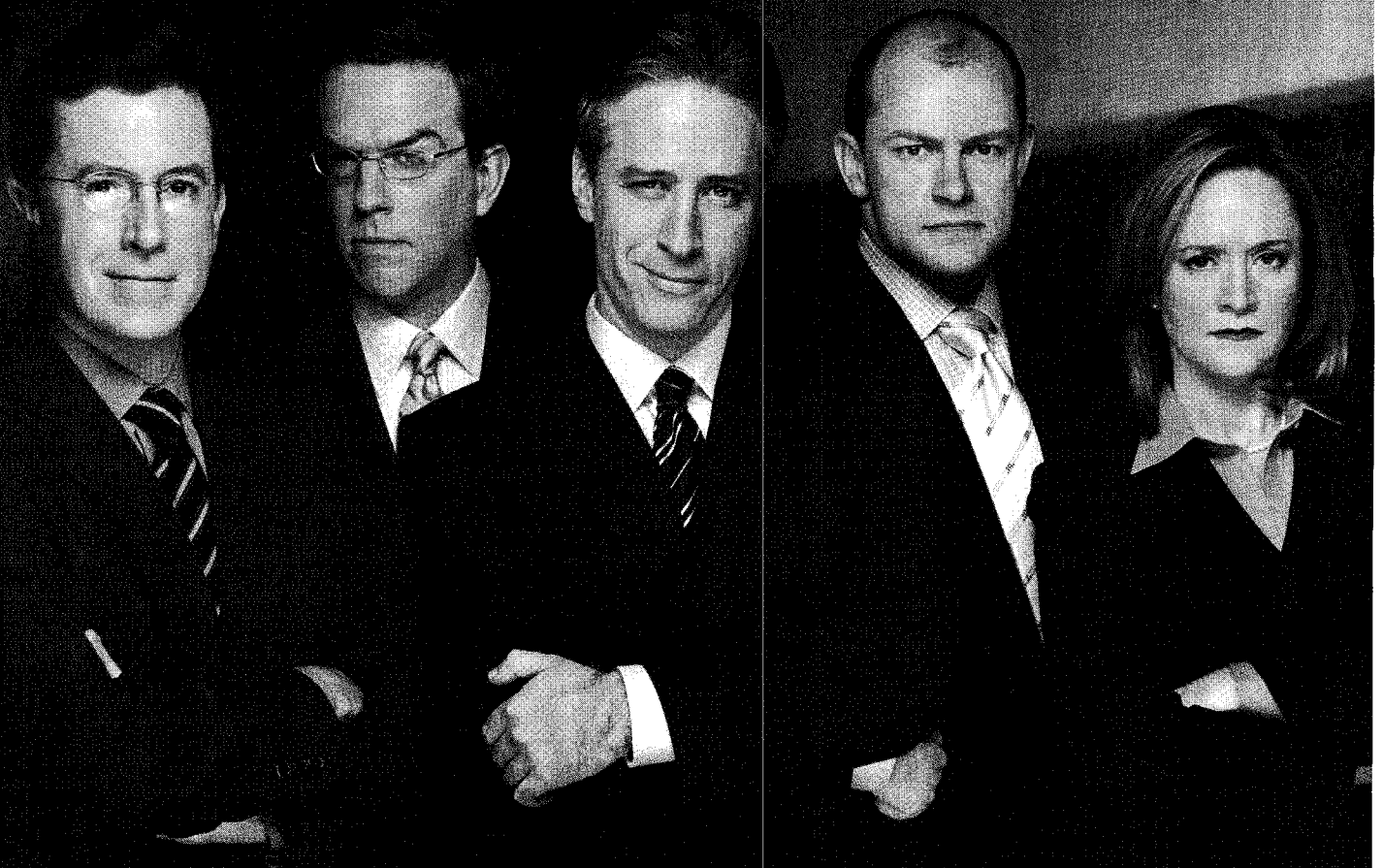


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*Cover: grounds of the former Republican Palace, Baghdad, October 2003; photograph by Greg Baker (AP Photo)*



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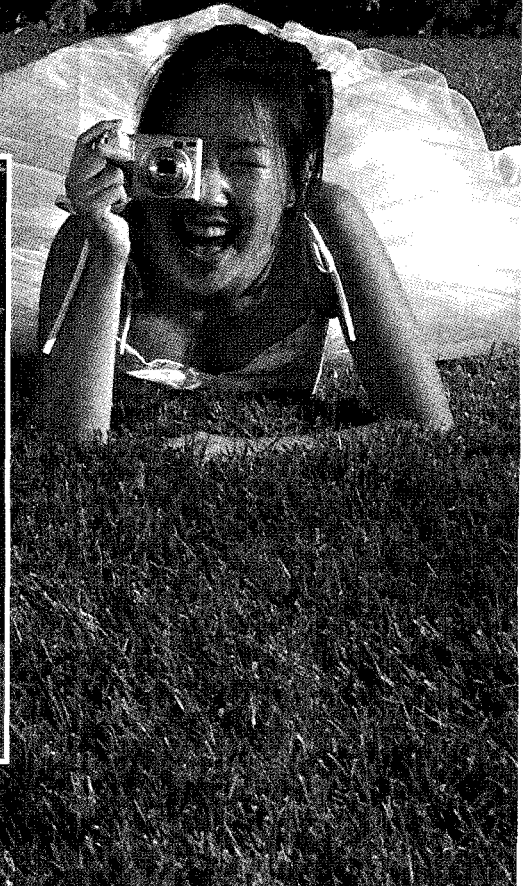
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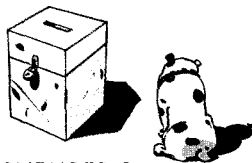
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NOVEMBER 1

## New EU Leader

The new president of the European Commission, Jose Barroso, takes office today for a five-year tenure. He will have a full plate that includes a contentious vote on the new European Union constitution, Turkey's potential entrance into the union, and the European response to terrorism. But his top priority—and, some would argue, his most difficult task—will be to carry out a set of stalled reforms intended to transform bloated EU welfare states into lean economic engines.

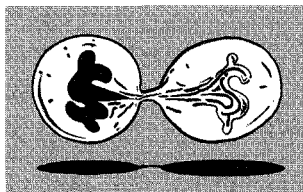


NOVEMBER 2

## Presidential Election

The theme of this election is vigilance. The Department of Homeland Security will be on guard against the terrorists who, according to innumerable summer press conferences, are determined to disrupt our democratic process. John Kerry, fearing a repeat of the 2000 Florida debacle, has a crack team of election lawyers on call nationwide. And thanks to some prodding by the Democrats, the State Department invited the Organization for

Security and Co-operation in Europe, an international election watchdog, to observe for the first time a U.S. presidential election, to keep everything free and fair. (The group has previously monitored elections in such places as Albania, Bosnia, and Uzbekistan.)



NOVEMBER 2

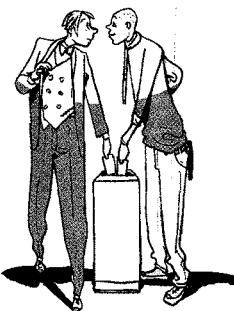
## California Stem-Cell Initiative

With federal funding for stem-cell research tangled up by a presidential order, several states and universities seek to sponsor the research themselves, in an effort to become the Silicon Valley of stem-cell research. A ballot initiative in California, if approved, would establish a \$3 billion stem-cell-research program, essentially creating California's own National Institutes of Health.

NOVEMBER 9

## Bernie Ebbers Trial

Normally it's difficult to implicate the CEO in a case like this, but the prosecution claims that the WorldCom executive's famous attention



NOVEMBER 2

## Gay Marriage Referenda

Though the Federal Marriage Amendment was handily defeated in the Senate, gay-marriage opponents are optimistic about their chances on Election Day, when at least eight states will vote on state constitutional amendments to ban gay marriage. A referendum during the August primary in Missouri gave gay-marriage opponents a sweeping victory (71 percent of the vote) with a surprisingly high turnout—which bodes well for the national Republican strategy of using state gay-marriage referenda to mobilize social conservatives during the presidential election.

# CALENDAR

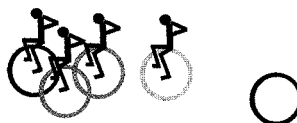
WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN THE WEEKS AHEAD

to detail has left evidence of his involvement in the minutiae of the crime. Lesson to those who would defraud investors of \$11 billion: Don't micromanage. (Additional government charges could delay the trial.)

NOVEMBER 15

## 2012 Olympics Bids Due

It's a clash of titans: New York, London, Paris, Madrid, and Moscow all made the short list for the 2012 Olympics. Paris, followed closely by London, is the early favorite, both for its history (two failed recent bids) and its plan: an inexpensive system featuring many temporary venues. The International Olympic Committee hopes to trim costs on the increasingly



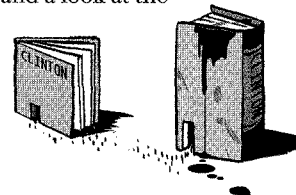
swollen games, with an eye to eventually allowing poorer cities in South America and Africa—continents that have never held an Olympiad—to serve as hosts.

NOVEMBER 18

## Clinton Library Opens

In a fit monument to Bill Clinton's love-him-or-hate-him legacy, the forty-second President may actually have two presidential libraries in Little Rock—one in the typical official style and the other, down the street, a "Counter Clinton Library" sponsored by his critics. The latter will be dedicated to revealing what its backers deem the

truth behind the official library's "propaganda." It is expected to feature a diorama of Clinton denials from the Lewinsky affair, multimedia exhibitions on Travelgate, and a look at the



"co-presidency" of Hillary Rodham Clinton. The Counter Clinton Library is still at the planning and fundraising stage, with no Lincoln Bedroom to deploy.

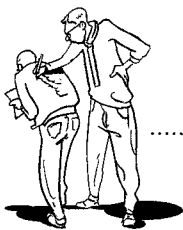
DECEMBER 9

## Palestinian Municipal Elections

If they can be brought off in the midst of the current uprising (they have already been pushed back twice since early summer, and could slip again), municipal elections could offer the Palestinian Authority a way to temper widespread allegations of local corruption and give Palestinians the chance to chip away at Yasir Arafat's monopoly on power. President Bush has supported the elections, which would be the first local ones since 1976, and the first of any kind since Arafat's 1996 victory. Hamas and other radical Islamist groups enjoy broad support as an alternative to Arafat, and could win roles as legitimate political players through the election—an outcome that some observers support as a way to moderate the groups' radicalism.







## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive

In his article "Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive" (September *Atlantic*), Alan Cullison writes, "They had fought the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and they fondly remembered that war as a galvanizing experience, an event that roused the indifferent of the Arab world to fight and win against a technologically superior Western infidel."

The Soviet Union was a Western infidel? I can see how one might be able to make the claim that today's Russia is "Westernized," but when the Soviet invasion began, in 1979, I doubt that anyone in the world (Afghan resistance and foreign Arab fighters included) viewed the Soviet empire as a "Western" power.

*Michael Alaly  
Pompano Beach, Fla.*

Alan Cullison is right to compare al-Qaeda's strategy of tempting the United States into hasty revenge to the methods of nineteenth-century anarchists. In *The Secret Agent*, Joseph Conrad's classic tale of the revolutionary underground of European émigrés in London, the sinister anarchist bomb-maker, known only as "the professor," makes the rationale of his struggle clear.

To break up the superstition and worship of legality should be our aim. Nothing would please me more than to see Inspector Heat [the detective assigned to the investigation of foreign anarchists] and his likes take to shooting us down in broad daylight with the approval of the public.

The point is that al-Qaeda does not gain succor just from what Cullison calls "Arab resentment against the United States"; it also profits from the West's agonizing over the legally—not to say morally—dubious methods used

to combat international terrorism, some of which clearly have a certain popular appeal, particularly in the United States. Obviously, this tension exists whenever liberal democracies are confronted by existential enemies. But the threat of terrorism—unlike, say, that of extremist political parties—cannot be assessed according to the normal rules of democratic politics. Hence the problem of terrorism is one of information (or, rather, the lack of it) and political responsibility, because the state is privy to what little information there is. It is obvious to all now that politicians like Bush and Blair are gambling with very high stakes—lives and liberty—but with little knowledge of the odds. Conrad's anarchist would recognize this dispiriting conclusion as proof that the terrorists have already succeeded in destabilizing our societies.

*Andrew Glencross  
Florence, Italy*

### Alan Cullison replies:

*Michael Alaly is certainly correct that by our own Cold War definitions the Soviet Union would not have been considered a "Western" power in 1979. But the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union take on another hue when you consider them from the perspective of the U.S.-armed fanatics in Afghanistan during that period. Most of them were illiterate, and not well versed in the ideological differences between capitalism and communism. Rather, they fought the Soviets primarily because they regarded them as infidels with decidedly Western values: the Soviets preached secular education, Western clothes, and greater rights for women. Today the United States is largely pressing the same values in its own occupation of Afghanistan. And its former allies, mujahideen like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Osama bin Laden, are now its most stalwart enemies.*

### Hollywood and Politics

In "The Hollywood Campaign" (September *Atlantic*), Eric Alterman described the Center for Public Integrity as an "advocacy" organization that receives funds from the Streisand Foundation.

The Center for Public Integrity is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that conducts investigative research and reporting on public-policy issues. We do not take positions on public-policy issues, we do not lobby, and we are not an advocacy group. We are a journalistic enterprise. The center's reports have won the George Polk Award, Investigative Reporters and Editors Awards, and Sigma Delta Chi Awards, among others. This year the center was awarded the PEN USA First Amendment Award for its body of work.

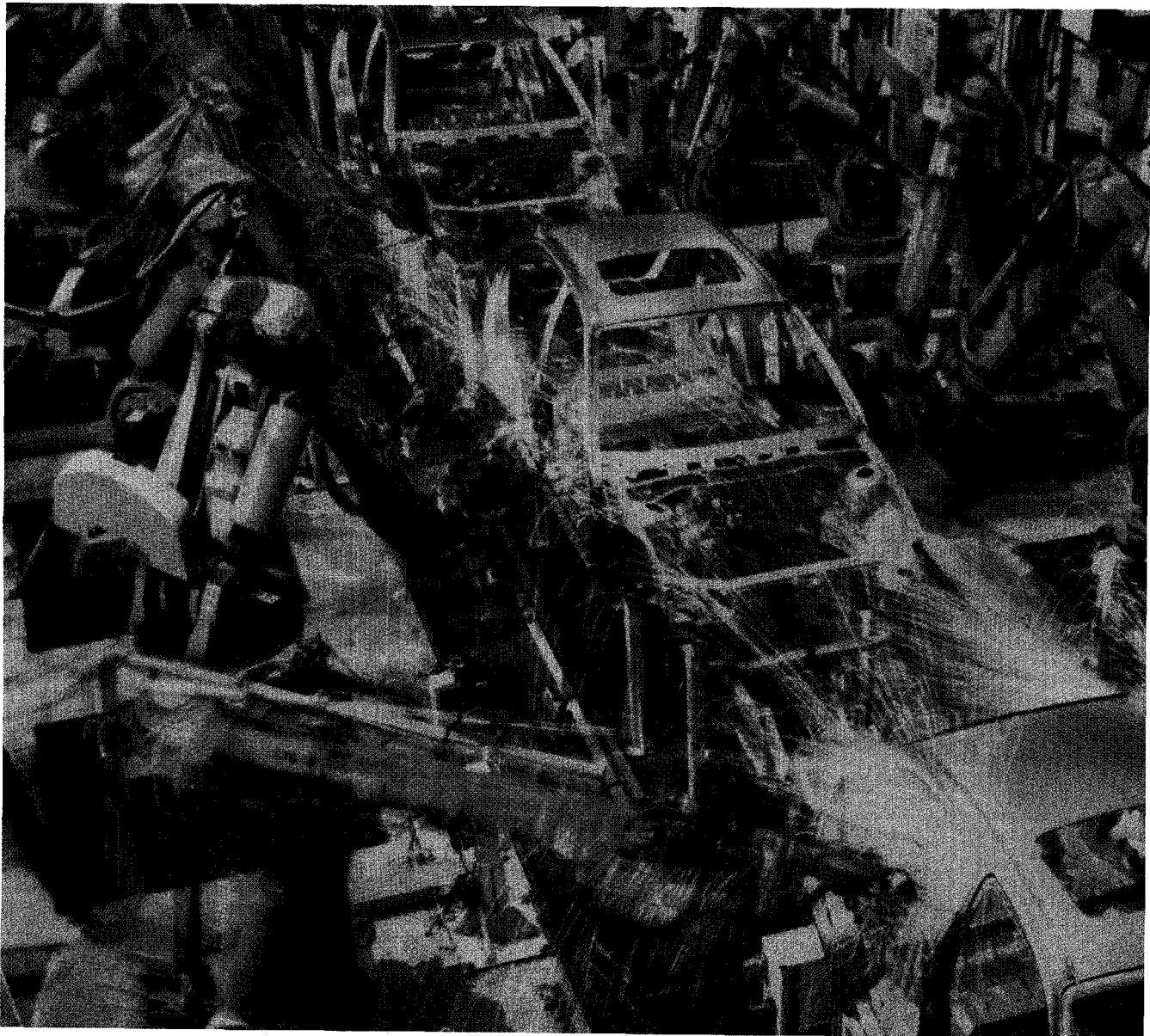
The center does not take money from governments, political parties, corporations, or labor unions. We disclose all our funders on our Web site, including the Streisand Foundation, which provided a small sum for general support in 2003. No one from that foundation—or any other—has influence over the content of the center's reports.

*Charles Lewis  
Executive Director  
Center for Public Integrity  
Washington, D.C.*

Eric Alterman's political star map missed a painful, long-enduring irony. Since 1990, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, the motion-picture community has given \$40.4 million to the Democrats in federal races, while the tobacco industry has delivered \$39.4 million to the Republicans. In other words, all the liberal largesse Alterman describes has been canceled out, almost dollar for dollar, by some of America's most detested and dangerous companies.



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But is that any way for Big Tobacco to thank its most valuable marketing partner? Not only are Hollywood's PG-13 and R-rated movies blowing more tobacco smoke than films have at any other time since 1950, but smoking scenes are responsible for recruiting half of all new adolescent smokers in the United States each year—390,000 kids, worth \$3.2 billion in lifetime revenue to the tobacco companies. Solid scientific evidence of catastrophic harm has attracted the keen attention of more than half of America's state attorneys general and compelled America's major health associations to call for an R rating on movies with tobacco imagery.

Hollywood's high-powered donors should do more than write checks. They should make sure that the motion pictures they produce and distribute don't pump up a notorious industry that is targeting their favorite candidates for defeat.

Regime change, as they say, begins at home.

*Jonathan Polansky  
Fairfax, Calif.*

**I**t seems to me that Eric Alterman took advantage of my hospitality to inaccurately report on my home, vehicles, activities, and energy use, all in order to label me a hypocrite. (Two Priuses, a ten-year-old BMW, and my daughter's friend's pickup truck hardly make for a driveway lined with "SUVs and assorted luxury vehicles.") Guess he's looking to pump up his populist image, which took a major body blow this year when he plunked down a fat wad on a home in East Hampton.

In observing Mr. Alterman's behavior those weeks he was out here, nosing around my home, gobbling Lynda Resnick's food, or ogling celebrities, I could ascertain that the shining gleam in his eye was not so much disgust as lust. I especially remember his weird stammering when I asked him about his own charitable activities: "M-m-my children go to public school!" Hmmm. I went to public school.

Perhaps for his next article Eric can expose the hypocrisy of his wealthy new neighbors. East Hampton has a thriving liberal philanthropic commu-

nity and ought to be good for more open-bar events and free lunches at the expense of those whose ranks he aspires to join.

Enjoy your glass house in the Hamptons, Mr. Alterman. And remember, hypocrisy begins at home.

*Heather Thomas  
Santa Monica, Calif.*

### The Stakes in 2004

**W**ith all due respect to Michael Barone ("The Stakes in 2004," September *Atlantic*), his thesis about the importance of the coming election is unsupported by facts, and undermined by some of the facts he cites. At least since World War II the United States has had an essentially bipartisan approach to all its major policies. Civil rights, containment of communism, support for mechanisms of globalization like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, rapprochement with China (and the Democratic versions of "Nixon to China," such as welfare reform and the "end of the era of big government"), Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare, big defense budgets, the interstate highway system, the invasion of Iraq—every single item on a list of significant federal policies has been dependent on widespread bipartisan support no matter which party initiated it, and the parties have taken turns leading the trend toward centralization and expansion of government since at least the Civil War.

Kerry may be able to pursue the current consensus policy in Iraq more effectively than Bush, because he will give the appearance of a "clean slate," but his voting record and his intentional vagueness on the subject indicate that he doesn't really disagree with its major features. No amount of nice talk will create the deployable divisions that our "allies" don't currently have, even if they were inclined to send their soldiers into harm's way—and apart from the British and the Poles, who are already in Iraq, they're not. In domestic policy Barone himself points out the significance of Republican congressional control; and the crash-and-burn results of the Clinton health-care reform (when the Democrats controlled both houses of Congress

and the White House) demonstrate that it doesn't seem to matter much on the big issues. The Supreme Court justices will no doubt continue to function more as slow-motion validators of social change than as social activists—as they usually do no matter who appoints them.

*Bob Powell  
Gdynia, Poland*

**I** found a couple of points Michael Barone made illuminating as to the state of the so-called "libertarian" wing of the Republican Party. Barone writes that domestic spending in a Kerry Administration "might be increased more than Bush would allow." But the Bush team increased nondiscretionary nondefense spending by 15 percent a year during the first three years of his presidency, on top of giant tax cuts and huge increases in defense spending. Fiscal discipline is clearly not this Administration's strong suit. The only time the Bush team showed even a modicum of restraint was in an election year. A second-term Bush presidency would not have to show such restraint again. Remember, the Vice President famously declared that "deficits don't matter."

I agree with Barone that the 2004 presidential election is the most important election of my lifetime, but he seems to be grasping at straws for a reason to support the President. The fact is that fiscal conservatives have made a deal with the devil, and they've gotten badly singed. The President's priorities have been war and values initiatives, leaving sound management and smaller government to his successors. If President Bush were to lose the election, Barone asks, "could a candidate like Rudolph Giuliani take the Republicans in a new, more libertarian direction?" Sounds like wishful thinking to me. I'm afraid the Republicans have found their election formula for the next twenty years: waving the flag, decrying signs of values slippage such as gay marriage, and passing out pork, like the horrific trade bill the House engineered earlier this year. There seems to be very little room left for anything remotely "libertarian."

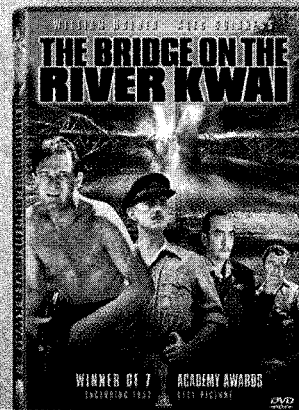
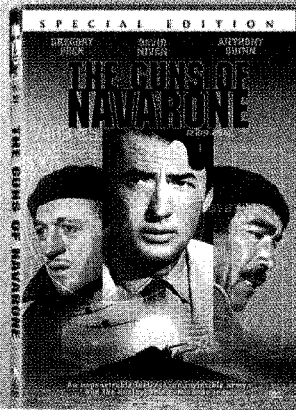
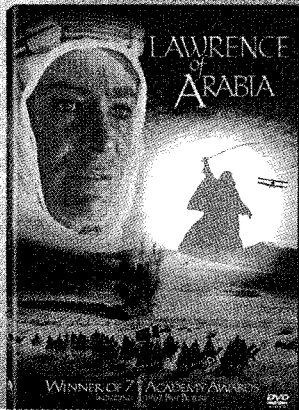
*Thomas Purcell  
Los Angeles, Calif.*



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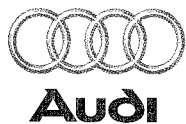
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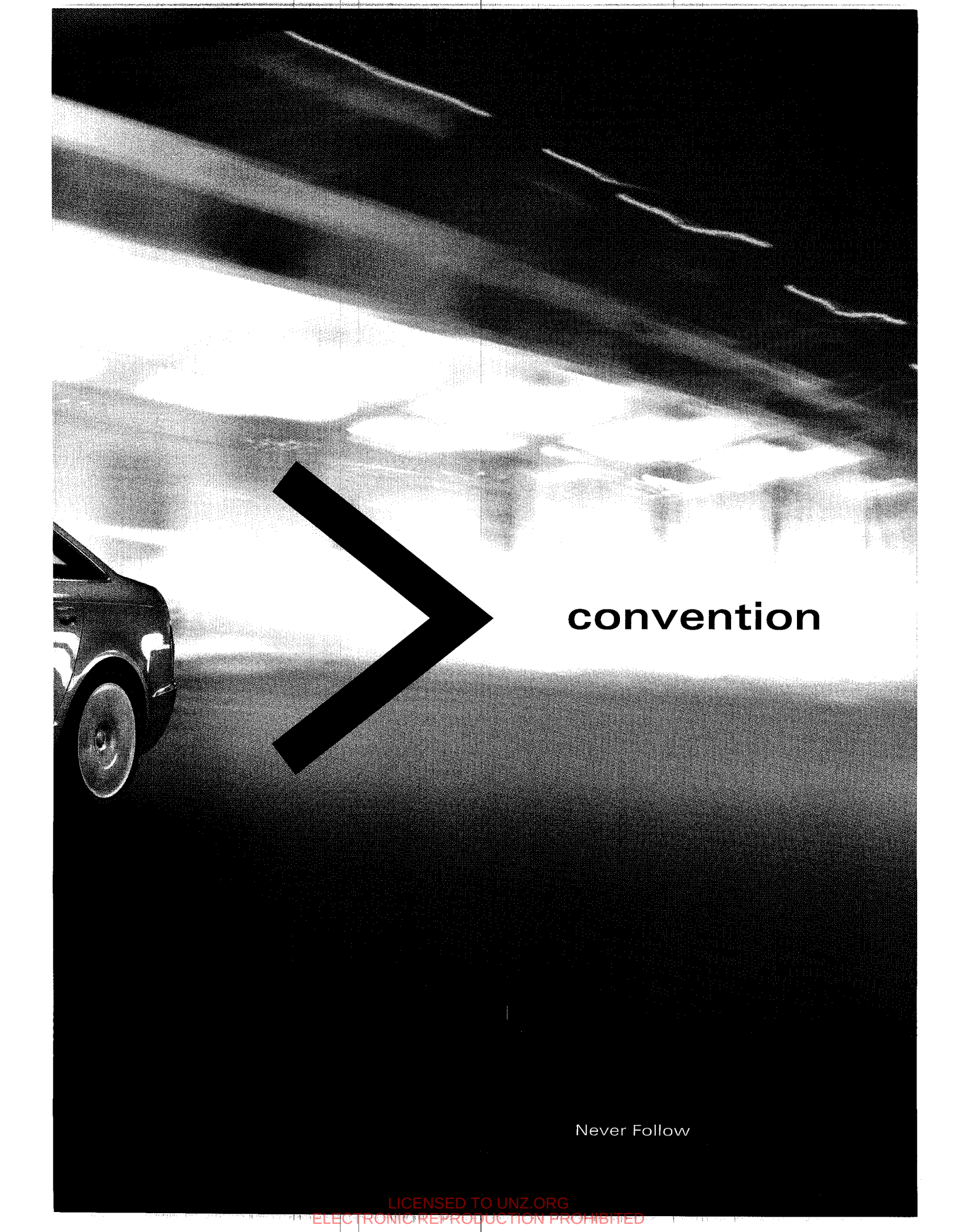




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Michael Barone asks if “a candidate like Rudolph Giuliani” could “take the Republicans in a new, more libertarian direction.” Giuliani has been accurately flattered, insulted, and otherwise characterized in many ways, but I don’t believe “libertarian” is one of them!

*Matthew Lifschultz  
Venice, Calif.*

### The Powell Doctrine

Why has our standing in the world declined? Maybe people abroad resent the patronizing attitude exemplified by Colin Powell in his interview with P. J. O’Rourke (“Adult-Male-Elephant Diplomacy,” September *Atlantic*). In it Powell compares the United States to an adult, and other countries to teenagers who will appreciate what we’re doing in the world when they grow up. Exactly what aspect of our experience in Iraq will cause other countries to see the light? Aren’t we the ones acting immaturely, by always demanding to do things our way?

*Charlie Dorris  
San Francisco, Calif.*

Did anyone note the irony of Colin Powell’s assuming “the white man’s burden” in explaining America’s role in the world in the twenty-first century? Virtually embracing the concept of an American empire, he is not shy about proclaiming America’s mission as the world’s disciplinarian. Yet he would still like the rest of the world to love us. This is what all parents want from their children, and setting strict rules and enforcing them provides the kind of ordered and structured environment many child psychologists feel is necessary for the healthy growth of a child. It even works in the military, in many corporate cultures, and in the world of sports—except, perhaps, when the professional stars make ten times as much as the coach. Powell chides Europe for not being willing to invest more resources in military materiel and, instead, leaving the heavy lifting to America. It’s as if the Europeans are playing and having a good time while we root out criminals and rid the world of evil. How childish of Europe. Maturity equals bigger guns in this conception.

Besides, we need to find more markets for our biggest export—military arms.

What the good Secretary doesn’t mention, of course, is that Europe’s foreign aid as a percentage of GDP exceeds America’s; that Europe generally takes care of its citizens through progressive social programs; and that European countries show far more concern for the environment in their public policies than America does. By and large they also have a saner approach to work. We have, it seems to me, the kind of inferiority complex that makes it necessary to constantly bully the world until everyone loves us. The problem is, the rest of the world’s countries are not children, and treating them as such is insulting and ignorant.

Secretary Powell uses the treatment of women as a measure of America’s enlightenment. But how advanced are we, with such a low percentage of women in Congress and the glass ceiling firmly in place in corporate America? Sexual harassment and discrimination actions are at an all-time high, and liability insurance for this has emerged as a new specialty. Perhaps the Secretary’s metaphors betray him and his hierarchical, male-dominant approach to life. O’Rourke may find this cute and endearing; women of sensitivity may find it rather Neanderthal. I was in the military just long enough to determine that it survives as a master-servant culture by holding out the prospect of becoming a master and returning to some innocent rookie the abuse one previously endured. A West Point graduate, if he stays in, will one day be able to abuse the greatest number of mortals of lesser rank. It is an alpha-male system that may work for wolves, but not necessarily for human beings.

Many of the Founding Fathers were wary of a standing army in peacetime, but now the concept is not even seriously questioned. As we move further toward martial law, it isn’t even the kind of world that requires military control that is scary—it is the mindset that the military model engenders. Why do we have no Department of Peace in America while the Defense Department gobbles up half the national budget? What General Powell will never be able to examine is how much of the Third World’s

economic weakness and unrepresentative governance is the result of earlier colonial periods and the policies of exploitation and repression practiced by the Western powers. Would Colin Powell even understand the need for affirmative action and reparations in his own country? It’s lonely at the top of the pyramid, and at every step up more is lost than is gained.

*J. Russell Tyldesley  
Catonsville, Md.*

P. J. O’Rourke’s conversation with Secretary Powell piqued my interest, because I have long admired both of these wise and sincere gentlemen. I have learned during my travels in other countries that people there are indeed not mad at us; on the contrary, they are quite friendly to us, their disagreements with our policies notwithstanding. So I tend to agree with our Secretary of State on that. Yet I cannot endorse his belief that the public is worrying too much about terrorism. I just don’t see it, save some questionable security checks at airports. Public attitudes are nothing like those I recall during the Cold War days of backyard bomb shelters. I do see head-in-the-sand complacency or a naive desire to be loved by all the world, or both. The silly disdain of our policy of pre-emption by some clearly shows a perilous failure to appreciate that our country is at war with an enemy bent on destroying us just because of who we are. I do agree with the Secretary’s comments about the global value of free markets and democracy. Yet the here-and-now challenge for America is securing public safety. The unhelpful five days of hypocritical chest-thumping and flag-saluting during the Democratic National Convention do not belie the true pacifist, socialist leanings of that crowd. The kids coming out of the madrassas don’t have a clue about the differences between Democrats and Republicans. They are charged by their leaders with destroying us because we are Westerners and do not believe as they do. This reality cannot be wished away. It must be eliminated. Then the democracies can grow and a global economy can flourish.

*Harold B. Wilber  
High Springs, Fla.*



**P**J. O'Rourke's conversation with Secretary of State Colin Powell is one of the best articles I have read this year. I felt as if I were in the room with them, enjoying the give-and-take of the conversation, and I thank *The Atlantic Monthly* for making it available. Bravo, sir. Well done.

J. B. Corrigan  
Washington, D.C.

### In Search of a Pope

**I**am sure that Paul Elie's article "In Search of a Pope" (September *Atlantic*) will not be the last to appear as we await the death of the current Pontiff. We will be fed ad nauseam all sorts of trivia about papal practices, papal history, and papal prospects, but out of political correctness one or two things will not be said. One is that only the Italians could have invented such a preposterous institution as the papacy, the last remnant of the Roman Empire; as emperors, pharaohs, shahs, and sultans have all disappeared, the Roman Pope continues the ancient tradition of showing the earthly face of God. Second, we will not hear that there is a venerable tradition of Catholic anti-clericalism that does not need Protestant rebellion to be suspicious of the reverend clergy. Before 1870, or at least before the French Revolution made the Popes martyrs and heroes, Catholics paid little mind to the Bishop of Rome, and Catholic rulers ignored him most of the time. You don't have to be a Protestant or an atheist to find the papacy an affront to both faith and common sense.

Norman Ravitch  
Savannah, Ga.

**H**aving read Paul Elie's recent book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, I was nonplussed by his assessment of John Paul II. Elie's deft book traces the lives and work of four great Roman Catholic writers of the mid-twentieth century: Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor. His palette is grand, and the work is hopeful and farsighted.

In his *Atlantic* article he paints a picture of John Paul that some of us hardly recognize: a living saint, a trav-

eler, and a savior of the Church. Some of us see quite a different Pope: one who raised the founder of Opus Dei to sainthood, has refused to recognize the homosexual community, has denied the right of contraception, has given Cardinal Law a position in Rome, and has appointed far too many cardinals with the same static conservative ideas as himself. It is time for him to retire, using the directive he issued for elderly cardinals.

John Paul seems to fear a return of the spiritual growth briefly enjoyed in the years of John XXIII's Second Vatican Council. But his attempt to stifle spiritual growth simply will not work. Whoever said that belief cannot develop and must remain always the same? Thomas Merton, one of Elie's chosen writers, is a sound example of the growth of a soul. His development, as seen from his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and through his journals, shows a somewhat narrow-minded young Trappist who grew into a world-embracing spiritual leader.

In a personal letter from 1967 Mer-

ton wrote, "I think ... that the renewal is ok, and in any case the old was no longer viable." I think that were he living in these times, Merton, too, would cringe at Elie's assessment of John Paul.

Randall De Trinis  
Lindhurst, Va.

### Paul Elie replies:

*It doesn't please me that my article disappointed an admiring reader of my book, but it seems to me that the article and the book take essentially the same approach. With the book I sought to tell the story of American Catholicism in the middle of the twentieth century by telling the stories of four American Catholic writers, looking for the substance of the faith in extraordinary lives rather than in generalizations about history or disputes over doctrine. In the article I put forward the view that a Pope is best understood in terms of his character, not through the scrutiny of a few public actions or positions on controversial issues. Seen this way, John Paul is something other than the rigid throwback he is made out to be. His travels, his delight in mass communication, his openings to*

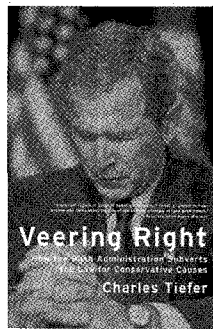
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*Judaism and Orthodoxy, his acknowledgment of the errors in the Church's past, and now his open physical frailty: these represent steps forward for the Church (imperfect as they are) and genuine developments of the reforms John XXIII set in motion by calling the Second Vatican Council. These developments make what I described as John Paul's "doctrinal fixity" and "blunt rhetorical force" in other areas—such as his "abrupt declarations that matters of ordination and sexuality, which had only just begun to receive informed attention from the world's Catholics, were closed to further discussion"—more disheartening than they might be otherwise.*

*John Paul's character has obscured the character of the men he has made archbishops. In my experience most of us know little about these men other than that they are doctrinally conservative—an observation that doesn't tell us very much. That is why I called for greater attention to the character and personal traits of the men considered papabile in the time before the next conclave.*

### Rumsfeld's Rules

**R**umsfeld's Rules Revisited," by Ross Douthat (September *Atlantic*), lists seven principles of management that are very sound in business or in government. But Rumsfeld ignores all of them, showing once more that power corrupts.

It is more important to look at character than at beliefs or knowledge when choosing people for high office. The person's behavior in the past must be the main criterion. The task of those with the power to appoint is to choose those who, because of their public or nonpublic personality, are less likely to become seriously corrupt than the average applicant. Has the applicant weaseled out of the blame for past disasters by blaming others? Has the applicant often abused things or people? What have former co-workers said about the applicant? Does ambition rule his or her life?

On these measures the Bush Administration seems to deserve, at best, a D-minus.

*Roy Lechtreck  
Alabaster, Ala.*

**I**t's always morbidly amusing to see the writings of a younger and apparently wiser Donald Rumsfeld being recycled for public consumption. However, I was disappointed to note the absence of my personal favorite from Ross Douthat's list. In light of current and recent events, I think the following can legitimately be considered the mother of all Rumsfeld's Rules:

"Arguments of convenience lack integrity and inevitably trip you up."

*Peter Vos  
Rockville, Md.*

### Nader Republicans

**N**ader Republicans," by Nathan Littlefield (September *Atlantic*), says there is "little the Democrats can do" about Ralph Nader's dangerous candidacy and the Republicans eager to help him pull votes away from Kerry. Not so. What they could do, and what they could have done four years ago, is what the major parties have historically been smart enough to do when faced with third-party challenges: namely, absorb the causes of the challenger into their platform.

Nader has broadly signaled that this would suit him fine and he would bow out if it happened. The Democratic National Committee prefers—again—to rage and wail against Nader and those sneaky Republicans, fighting to keep his name off state ballots rather than daring to take up the cause of the progressives in any respect. That might keep corporate donors happy, but it doesn't seem to be doing much to energize the Democratic base.

*Andrew Christie  
Los Osos, Calif.*

### Nathan Littlefield replies:

*Andrew Christie's argument is a familiar one. I've heard it before from progressives who wish the Democrats would move in their direction, but the facts don't bear it out. Ralph Nader has "broadly signaled" that he would leave the race? He pressured John Kerry to choose John Edwards as his running mate. Then Kerry chose Edwards, and Nader redoubled his efforts to get himself on the ballot in swing states. Nader and Kerry have a well-publicized "reconciliation meeting"—and nothing*

*changes. The entire Democratic establishment believes, and says, that Nader will take votes away from Kerry. The entire Republican establishment seems to believe, but does not say, the same thing—which explains the support Nader has received from big Republican donors. (And Kerry is a corporate candidate?) Perhaps the Democrats are missing the boat, all those Republican activists are wasting their time and money, and Mr. Christie is right. Yet he offers no evidence. In fact, the 2.74 percent of the national popular vote that Nader won in 2000 does not augur well for a progressive groundswell if the Democrats move to the left, especially compared with the 19 percent Ross Perot netted as a right-leaning populist in 1992. Furthermore, voter turnout was up in the previous presidential election, but there was no significant correlation between turnout and voting for Nader—meaning that in most states he simply split the liberal vote with Gore. Which is exactly why Republicans are helping Nader's candidacy this year.*

### Borges Biography

**C**hristopher Hitchens calls Edwin Williamson's biography of Jorge Luis Borges (September *Atlantic*) "altogether first-rate." I would agree, though I question Williamson's apparent reliance on María Kodama for information about Borges's last years. As executor of Borges's literary estate she has exhibited unparalleled power—power enough to delete an entire decade (1969–1979) from the story of his life.

In this decade the publisher E. P. Dutton published ten books by or about Borges, among them *The Aleph and Other Stories 1933–1969*. I served throughout this decade as Borges's editor.

You will find these books, if you find them at all, in secondhand bookshops. Kodama has repeatedly refused to allow reprints of any of them, for the single reason that Norman Thomas di Giovanni had a hand in translating or editing the text. Their feud has its origin in the contract Dutton signed with Di Giovanni in 1969 for his translation of the first book, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, and his work as translator for all the books to come.



The contract, inexplicably, gave the author a smaller share of the royalties than the translator. Kodama now regards Di Giovanni as a thief who stole thousands of dollars from her estate. No reconciliation is in sight. Meanwhile, any biographical information she gave to Williamson must be regarded as unreliable.

Marian Skedgell  
Roxbury, Conn.

Christopher Hitchens's characterization of Martín Fierro—"unscrupulous, untied by any social obligation, and thirsty for murder and spoils"—is not only incorrect but also indicative of a poor knowledge of José Hernández's book and the abuses suffered by the Argentine gauchos at the hands of first Spanish and later British *teratenientes*. Even Jorge Luis Borges said, in 1953, "I can not condemn Martín Fierro because I know that certain acts committed by men under difficult circumstances calumniate them. Someone can steal and not be a thief. Someone can kill and not be a murderer."

No Argentine believes that Martín Fierro should be considered a model citizen. He was never given a chance to be one. He was the victim of the excesses and quasi-slavery exercised by the "*estancieros criollos*," undercover Spaniards who disguised themselves as Argentines and continued to subject the new nation to the old methods of Spanish corruption and abuses.

Jose Maria Lavalle Santoruvo  
Boca Raton, Fla.

As a fan of both Jorge Luis Borges and Christopher Hitchens, I was predictably excited to read Hitchens's review of Edwin Williamson's new biography of the late, great Argentine writer. I thought I had attained Nirvana, moreover, when Hitchens deftly incorporated a reference to the work of one of Canada's literary icons, Robertson Davies, into his review.

I was dismayed, however, by Hitchens's reference to "the narrator of Robertson Davies's Deptford Trilogy," because each of the three books in that series is narrated by a different character. The instance Hitchens is recalling—in which the narrator is "nauseated by the same

paternal notion of what constitutes *un rite de passage*" after his father orchestrates a night for him with a Montreal prostitute—is depicted in the second book of the trilogy, *The Manticore*, narrated by one David Staunton, Q.C.

Nitpicking? Well, yes. But it is also the kind of precision that is in keeping with Borges's notorious bibliophilia, and with Davies's and Hitchens's own writings.

Andrew Johnston  
Westmount, Quebec

## Reviewing Korea

The sheer viciousness of B. R. Myers's personal attack on Bruce Cumings ("Mother of All Mothers," September *Atlantic*) moves *The Atlantic* ever closer to the standards of fascist journalism. Cumings is easily the most distinguished historian working on modern Korean affairs in the United States today. To suggest differences of political approach to North Korea between Cumings and Selig Harrison is simply embarrassing, since both authors come to the same conclusions. Myers's condemnation of

any attempt to understand North Korea puts him in a class with Undersecretary of State John Bolton and other know-nothings who have been in charge of American foreign policy since 2001. Even though George W. Bush told Bob Woodward that he loathes Kim Jong Il, it was Cumings who first noted what Bush and Kim have in common: neither would have amounted to anything without their daddies.

Chalmers Johnson  
Japan Policy Research Institute  
Cardiff, Calif.

B. R. Myers's review of the books about Kim Jong Il reminds me of a view from the other side—a book called *The Korean Revolution Review, Volume II*, which I obtained during a two-week stay in Pyongyang in 1979. It is ostensibly a history of the Korean War.

Remarkably, when the book is opened at any page, the reader finds a photograph of, an article about, and a quotation from the man we soon began to refer to by his initials, GBLCKIS—Great Beloved Leader Comrade Kim Il

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Sung, spoken almost as one word. He's "President Kim Il Sung" in the book, which is, in effect, an account of his apotheosis. Also remarkable in this history of the war is that the word "China" appears nowhere.

As far as the management of people is concerned, Hitler was a beginner compared with Kim.

*J. Rufford Harrison  
Washington, N.H.*

**I**wish B. R. Myers could have ended this article about Korea without joking about rape. There is nothing funny about rape, from which few victims ever fully recover.

*Kathleen Waugh  
Shelton, Wash.*

#### **B. R. Myers replies:**

*Not being stark raving mad, I have never joked about rape. In my article I referred to rumors that Kim Jong Il scouts high schools for his harem. We know from Mao's biography that his own teenage concubines were thrilled to be chosen, and in view of Kim's even more exalted status I cannot share Kathleen Waugh's apparent assumption that North Korean girls would feel differently. In any case, the book I reviewed does not accuse Kim of forcing anyone into sex. I might add that the girls in question are seniors, and therefore seventeen; this would put them above the age of consent even in Ms. Waugh's home state.*

*And speaking of "sheer viciousness" and fascism: Chalmers Johnson and Bruce Cumings demand more understanding for a regime that starves its proletariat to feed an elite class and a goose-stepping army, a regime that incarcerates entire families in the name of ethnic integrity, a regime that excoriates Americans as a depraved race controlled by Jewish capital. I am no fan of our nation's foreign policy either, but I prefer to oppose it from a left-wing standpoint, thank you very much.*

#### **Immigrant Lifestyle**

**W**ait! Before you get your passport revalidated, examine the fallacy of the study cited in "The Immigrant Lifestyle Bonus" (Primary Sources, September *Atlantic*). The report is comparing the life expectancy of healthy adults

(immigrants to the United States) with the life expectancy at birth of all U.S. nationals. If the report compared the life expectancy of a group of twenty-five-year-old immigrants with the life expectancy of a similar group of twenty-five-year-old native-born Americans, I doubt there would be a statistically valid difference.

*James Miller  
Roseville, Calif.*

#### **Editors' note:**

*Although James Miller makes an intriguing point about the impact of infant mortality on overall life expectancy, it should be noted that infant health, too, is considerably better in the immigrant community than it is among native-born Americans. From 1998 to 2000, according to the study in question, immigrants' infants were 18 percent less likely than other American babies to suffer from low birth weight, and the infant-mortality rate for the children of immigrants was a remarkable 27 percent lower than the rate for the U.S. population as a whole.*

#### **The God Vote**

**A**s Peter F. Drucker has said, "There are no creeds in mathematics." With that in mind, I submit that your recent feature on the "religion gap" ("The God Vote," by Ross Douthat, September *Atlantic*) misrepresented the Pacific Northwest, particularly Oregon, on several counts.

First, and most important, the data reported by the Glenmary Research Center are incomplete, as its Web site admits, and may be methodologically unsound. Because the U.S. Census Bureau is legally barred from asking mandatory questions about religion, the Glenmary report, *Religious Congregations and Membership in the United States: 2000*, represents the best data available. Unfortunately, however, the report seems to conflate city and county population figures, as in the case of Medford, Oregon, which you baldly label "America's most godless locale."

The problem is this: Any Oregonian knows that Medford is neither "godless" nor a "metropolitan area"; a relatively small city with long-standing ties to

the timber industry, Medford is, in fact, fairly conservative—at least when compared with the northwestern regions of the state. The error apparently stems from the report's double-dipping—it uses the figure 181,269 for the population of both Jackson County and one of its constituent parts, the Medford-Ashland "metropolitan area." In fact, the total population of Medford and Ashland is 80,000, not 180,000. (If one includes the smaller neighboring communities, the figure for the "metropolitan area" is closer to 100,000.) Hence the rate of religious affiliation in the Medford-Ashland area is likely to be closer to 40 percent than the 22.2 percent reported by the Glenmary Center. (Similarly, the rate in Corvallis, Oregon, is more likely 30 percent than 22.6 percent.) This analysis calls into question your broader assertion that the Northwest is home to five of the fifteen most secular metropolitan areas in the United States (Corvallis, for the record, is hardly a "metropolitan area" either).

For further disproof, consider that the "godless" claim is not borne out by election results. Unlike its neighbor to the north, Oregon will be quite competitive in the 2004 presidential election. In 2000 Gore won Oregon only narrowly, and although the state voted for Dukakis once and Clinton twice, it also chose Nixon over Kennedy, Ford over Carter, and Reagan over both Carter and Mondale. In fact, with the exception of 1964, Oregon chose the Republican candidate in every presidential contest from 1948 to 1984. And, to return to the previous example, it seems unlikely that Jackson County could be as fervently secular as you assert and yet support George W. Bush by a substantial margin (46,052 to 33,153). Insofar as one grants that Republicanism is now a reasonably good proxy for religious adherence, one must admit that the depiction of Medford (and perhaps all of Oregon) as the "most godless" is suspect, at least.

*Colin H. Hunter  
Medford, Ore.*

**I** can't help taking offense at your labeling of the American Northwest as "godless." I would count myself and my family as typical of many in this region



who have an allegiance to God that is not wholly based on doctrine or institutional membership. Fully respecting that an article like "The God Vote" (along with its statistical source) can probably be derived only from a numerical assessment of the religious membership in a given population, it is a bit abrasive—don't you think?—to pigeonhole a population as "godless" simply because it doesn't exhibit high enrollment in churches. May I suggest that there are many people (albeit hard to count) in this area whose godliness is exemplary, not so much in their Sunday-morning attendance but in their everyday social presence, philanthropic attitude, and treatment of their surroundings? To characterize such a population as godless is insulting, to say the least. It insinuates to your readers a pervasive, brutal backwardness that plainly isn't evident.

*Bernard Conrad  
Grants Pass, Ore.*

**Ross Douthat replies:**

*Both Colin Hunter and Bernard Conrad are correct that the Glenmary data, which show church membership rather than attendance or religious intensity, are an imperfect proxy for religiosity—so Jackson County, and by extension the entire Pacific Northwest, may be less "godless" than "unchurched." (Or, alternatively, many of the region's religious inhabitants may belong to denominations that declined to participate in the study.) However, Mr. Hunter's insistence that Republican strength in his home state necessarily reflects Oregonian religiosity illustrates the difficulties with using the "religion gap" as a sweeping explanation for voting behavior. Although it's true that, overall, church attendance and Bush voting tend to be correlated, there are countless exceptions to the rule, from deeply religious Catholic and black Protestant communities that lean Democratic to apparently less pious areas that vote Republican—of which Medford, Oregon, may be an example.*

**Lessons of Abu Ghraib**

George Orwell said the only rule in power politics is that there are no rules. Mark Bowden ("Lessons of Abu Ghraib," July/August *Atlantic*) says, "In

certain rare cases keeping a prisoner cold, uncomfortable, frightened, and disoriented is morally justified and necessary." Under what rules, civil or military, is such treatment of prisoners legal? If there really is no legal justification, then Orwell's view of power politics prevails.

*Neil Kitson  
Vancouver, British Columbia*

I was outraged and ashamed at the revelation of the abuse and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners. And then I went to sleep with a clear conscience. Our democratic society, in critical moments like these, is mature, introspective, and fair enough to bring the perpetrators to justice. Starkly contrasting qualities can be seen in the sanctimonious reaction reverberating globally over the scandal, especially in the Arab world. The overblown media attention is just another excuse for Arab societies in particular—but for Western apologists, too—to manifest their already deep-seated and inculcated anti-Americanism, carefully nurtured for decades. Never mind that the incidents are aberrant. Mark

Bowden's article, although well intentioned, misses the big picture.

Where is Arab outrage at the systematic murder, torture, and repression exercised by most of the Arab world's corrupt and tyrannical governments—at the hundreds of thousands who died under Saddam Hussein? Where is the outrage and shame in the Muslim street over the gruesome televised decapitation of an innocent journalist just because he was Jewish? Where is the outrage and shame at the inexcusable slaughter by Arabs of Americans on 9/11? Where is the outrage and shame in the Arab world at its lack of freedom, accountability, and justice? Where is the Arab world's outrage and shame at using its own children as expendable weapons to elicit global sympathy? Where is the Arab outrage and shame at being indoctrinated by self-serving governments and religious leaders intent on keeping the masses uneducated and focused on a largely fictitious version of the Israeli-Arab conflict in order to divert attention from their control and systematic rape of their own people and resources?

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The silent indifference and complicity of the majority of Arabs is damning, as is their lack of introspection, their failure to take responsibility for their own fate and actions, and their perversion of the true tenets of Islam. Blaming others for one's own iniquities and fueling the myth of Arab infallibility is easy.

And although the coverage of the Abu Ghraib scandal by the media is of great importance, it should be placed in context and perspective. It is always easy to hold America and Israel to a higher standard than the rest of the world, but the premise is inherently biased and plays wonderfully into the hands of the Arab propaganda machine, which has no understanding whatsoever of democracy.

*Alain Frank  
Charlotte, N.C.*

Mark Bowden writes that "when a prison, an army, or a government tacitly approves coercive measures as a matter of course, widespread and indefensible human-rights abuses become inevitable."

Such tacit approval can be found in 42 U.S.C §1997e(e), enacted in 1996 by the Republican Congress and signed by Bill Clinton: "No federal civil action may be brought by a prisoner confined in a jail, prison, or other correctional facility for mental or emotional injury suffered while in custody without a prior showing of physical injury."

So, as a matter of course, guards at federal and state prisons are free to inflict hooding, threats, and humiliation identical to that found at Abu Ghraib.

In the famous 1803 decision *Marbury v. Madison* the Supreme Court declared that where there is a right, there is a remedy. America has removed the remedy for such human-rights abuses, signaling that the rights have been removed as well.

*Thomas Giesberg  
Rosharon, Texas*

Mark Bowden's article amplifies everything that is wrong with the media's coverage of the Bush Administration and the war in Iraq. Bowden has allowed his common sense to become a casualty of war.

In his article he suggests that the soldiers in Abu Ghraib acted on their own initiative, and that several people up the chain of command knew but did nothing. He writes, "It seems doubtful that the photos were meant to be used later to intimidate other prisoners, as has been suggested ... These photographs have the appearance of grotesque souvenirs." There are more than a thousand pictures from the Abu Ghraib prison scandal. Do you really believe that a few people stood with a camera day in and day out, snapping photo after photo just for fun?

Common sense suggests that taking so many pictures is a lot of work. Obviously, this whole process was designed by the CIA and the Defense Department's psychological-warfare people specifically to target the Arab mind. Let us not forget that the CIA literally wrote the book on physical torture and interrogation techniques—a book that was given to our allies in Central America in the 1970s and 1980s. You can see the effects of this handiwork in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Ecuador. The testimony is buried in old Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearings.

Would it be wrong to assume that the CIA's interrogation "contractors" in Iraq used a manual similar to the one that the Agency has sent out into the field in the past? Bowden would have us believe that after 9/11 the CIA's contractors in Iraq and Afghanistan decided to throw out the old-school techniques of information extraction in favor of a new and improved warm-and-fuzzy approach. But I bet that nowhere in the new manual does the CIA worry about discerning whether a prisoner is an "insurgent," a "combatant," or an innocent civilian (which most were) who was picked up in a security sweep. Once again, apply some common sense. How many prisoners died under "suspicious circumstances" in Abu Ghraib alone?

The Bush Administration is covering up the facts. An investigation consists of talking to the accused soldiers, the contractors, the abused (those who aren't dead), and the rest who were detained during the period when the photographs were taken. We are talking about fewer than 500 people—if you believe Donald Rumsfeld that this was

an isolated incident involving a few bad apples. The investigation should take only a month. Three at the most. But instead here we are, almost two years after Rumsfeld knew, and yet nothing legitimate has been learned.

Thank God this "abuse" isn't systematic and is just an isolated incident at only one prison. It's kind of like the "isolated incident" of the Navy's Tailhook sex scandal. Who ever heard of the Pentagon's trying to protect the brass at the top? By God, George Bush will have his people get to the bottom of this. Just like he did with Enron.

*Roger Braun  
Ina, Ill.*

Mark Bowden quotes Karl Rove as predicting that "it will take a generation to repair the damage to America's image in the Middle East." Rove is wrong on two counts. First, America's image has not been damaged in the Middle East—the photos from Abu Ghraib did not tell people there anything they did not already know. Our image has been damaged only here at home, where *we* are beginning to question what our leaders are doing in our name. Second, it will not take a generation to repair the damage. Our memories are short, and "Abu Ghraib" is hard to pronounce.

*John Rigney  
San Francisco, Calif.*

I had been living in Egypt for about a year when the Abu Ghraib prison photos began to emerge. And when I spoke to a junior diplomat from the U.S. embassy recently, he made predictions similar to those of Karl Rove. When I asked a number of educated Egyptians what they thought of the photos, however, I was surprised by their response: "It's not that bad" was the prevailing attitude. They told me that this type of prisoner treatment occurs regularly over there, though they expected better from the Americans.

I do not wish to downplay the unacceptability of the behavior documented in those photos, or their lasting effects. I'm just telling you what I heard.

*Pete Willows  
Cairo, Egypt*



**Mark Bowden replies:**

*Despite the tone of Neil Kitson's letter, I don't think we disagree. I did not argue that coercive treatment of prisoners should ever be legal; indeed, just the opposite. It should always be illegal. Coercion is, however, moral in certain rare instances, such as the case cited in my story "The Dark Art of Interrogation" (October 2003 Atlantic) of a kidnapper who refused to tell the police where he had buried alive his child victim. It is possible for a moral act to be illegal. The interrogator who chooses to break the rules for moral reasons can and should be brought up on charges, but he can raise moral necessity in defense, just as self-defense is raised as a defense for murder. I don't think Orwell would disagree.*

**A Soldier's Perspective**

Regarding "Blind Into Baghdad," by James Fallows (January/February Atlantic): George Bush gathered American support behind invading Iraq, I am told, using two arguments. Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and the capability to deliver them; and Iraq was a supporter of al-Qaeda terrorism, and may have been involved in the attacks of 9/11. These points are now the subject of vicious words and gratuitous finger-pointing, as people insist that "we" were misled into what started as a dynamic liberation and has become a bloody counterinsurgency. Watching politicians declaim and hearing televised experts expound on why we went to war and on their opinions of those running the White House and the Defense Department, I have one question: When is someone going to ask the guys who were there?

What about the opinions of those whose lives were on the line, massed on the Iraq-Kuwait border beginning in February of last year? I don't know how President Bush got the country behind him, because at the time I was living in a hole in the dirt in northern Kuwait. Why have I not heard a word from anyone who actually carried a rifle or flew a plane into bad-guy country last year, and who has since had to deal with the ugly aftermath of a violent liberation? What about the guys who had the most to lose—what do they think about all this?

I was there. I am one of those guys who fought the war and helped keep the peace. I am a major in the Marine Reserves, and during the war I was the senior American attached to the 1 Royal Irish Battlegroup, a rifle battalion of the British army. I was commander of five U.S. Marine air/naval gunfire liaison teams, and also the liaison officer between U.S. Marines and British army forces. I was activated on January 14, 2003, and seventeen days later I and my Marines were standing in Kuwait with all of our gear, ready to go to war.

I majored in political science at Duke, and I graduated with a master's degree in government from the Kennedy School at Harvard. I understand realpolitik, geopolitical jujitsu, economics, and the reality of the Arab world. I know the tension between the White House, the UN, Langley, and Foggy Bottom. One of my grandfathers was a two-star Navy admiral; my other grandfather was an ambassador. I am not a pushover, blindly following whoever is in charge, and I don't kid myself that I live in a perfect world. But the

war made sense then, and the occupation makes sense now.

As dawn broke on March 22, 2003, I became part of one of the largest and fastest land movements in the history of war. I went across the border alongside my brothers in the Royal Irish, following the 5th Marine Regiment from Camp Pendleton as they swept through the Ramaylah oil fields. I was one of those guys you saw on TV every night—filthy, hot, exhausted. I think the NRA and its right-to-bear-arms mantra is a joke, but by God I was carrying a loaded rifle, a loaded pistol, and a knife on my body at all times. My boots rested on sandbags placed on the floor of my Humvee to protect me from the blast of a land mine or an IED.

I killed many Iraqi soldiers, as they tried to kill me and my Marines. I did it with a radio, directing air strikes and artillery in concert with my British artillery-officer counterpart, in combat along the Hamar Canal, in southern Iraq. I saw, up close, everything the rest of you see in the newspapers: dead bodies, parts of dead bodies, hel-

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met with bullet holes through them, handcuffed POWs sitting in the sand, oil-well fires with flames reaching a hundred feet into the air and a roar you could hear from over a mile away.

I stood on the bloody sand where Marine Second Lieutenant Therrel Childers was the first American killed on the ground. I pointed a loaded weapon at another man for the first time in my life. I did what I had spent fourteen years training to do, and my Marines—your Marines—performed so well it still brings tears to my eyes to think about it. I was proud of what we did then, and I am proud of it now.

Along with the violence, I saw many things that lifted my heart. I saw thousands of Iraqis in cities like Qurnah and Medinah—men, women, children, grandparents carrying babies—running into the streets at the sight of us, the first Western army to arrive. I saw them screaming, crying, waving, cheering. They ran from their homes at the sound of our Humvee tires roaring in from the south; they brought us bread and tea and cigarettes and photos of their children. They chattered at us in Arabic, and we spoke to them in English, and neither understood the other. The entire time I was in Iraq, I had one impression from the civilians I met: *Thank God someone has finally arrived with bigger men and bigger guns to be, at last, on our side.*

Let there be no mistake, those of you who don't believe in this war: the Baath rulers were the Nazis of the second half of the twentieth century. I saw what the murderous, brutal regime of Saddam Hussein wrought on that country through his party and their fedayeen henchmen. They raped, murdered, tortured, extorted, and terrorized for thirty-five years. There are mass graves throughout Iraq only now being discovered. The 1st Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment liberated a prison in Iraq populated entirely by children. The Baathists brutalized the weakest among them, and killed the strongest.

I saw in the eyes of the people how a generation of fear reflects in the human soul.

The Baath rulers, like the Nazis before them, kept power by spreading out, placing their officials in every

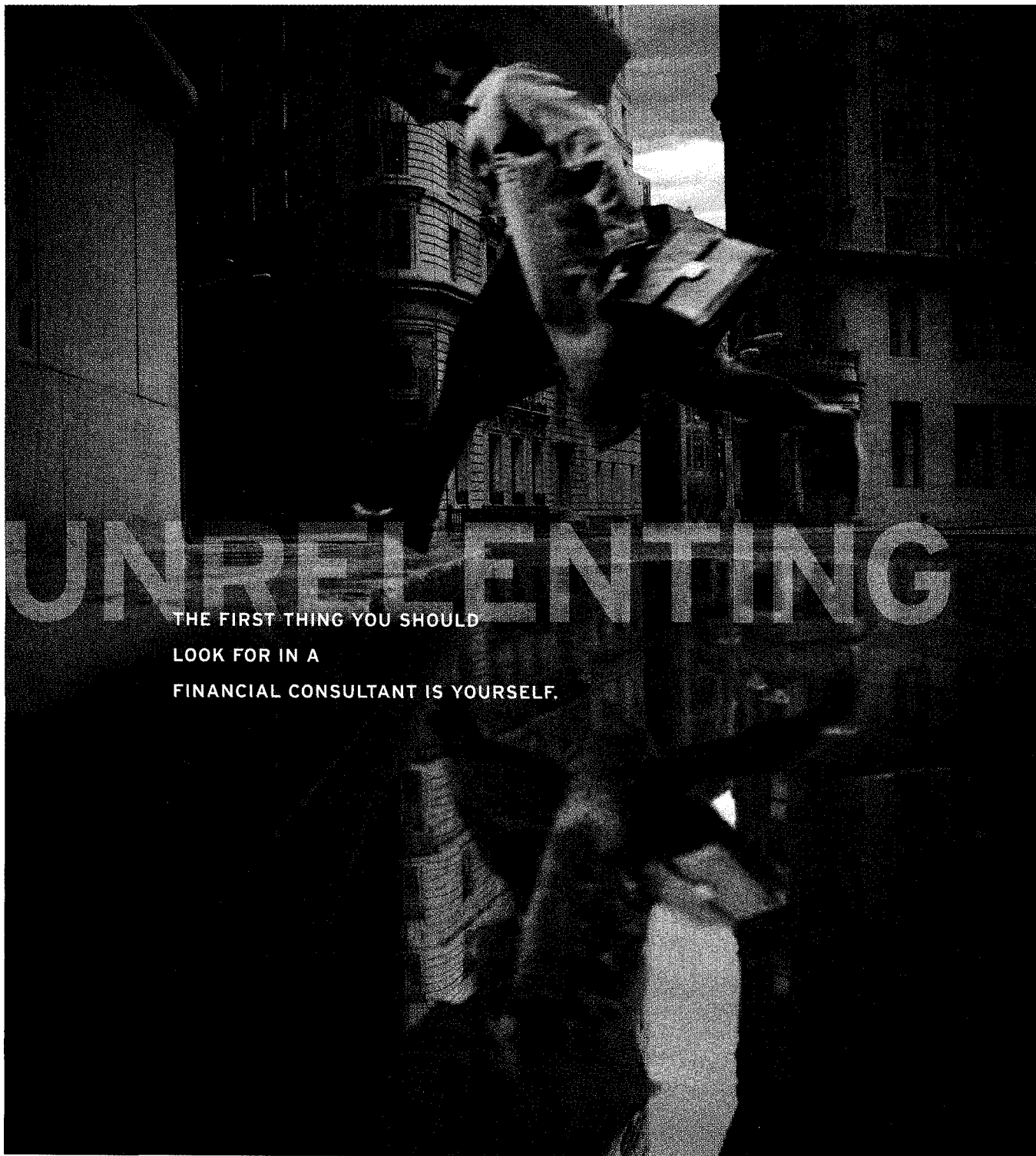
city and every village to keep the people under their boot. Everywhere we went we found rifles, ammunition, RPG rounds, mortar shells, rocket launchers, and artillery. When we took over the southern city of Ramaylah, our battalion commander tore down the Baath signs and commandeered the former regime headquarters in town (which, by the way, was twenty feet from the local school). My commander himself took over the office of the local Baath leader, and in opening the desk of that thug found a set of brass knuckles and a gun. These are the people who are now in prison, and that is where they deserve to be.

The analogy is simple. For years you have watched the same large, violent man come home every night, and you have listened to his yelling and the crying and the screams of children and the noise of breaking glass, and you have always known that he was beating his wife and his kids. Everyone on the block has known it. You ask, cajole, threaten, and beg him to stop, on behalf of the rest of the neighborhood. Nothing works. After listening to it for thirteen years, you finally gather up the biggest, meanest guys you can find, you go over to his house, and you kick the door down. You punch him in the face and drag him away. The house is a mess, the family poor and abused—but now there is hope. You did the right thing.

I can speak with authority on the opinions of both British and American infantry in that place and at that time. Let me make this clear: at no time did anyone say or imply to any of us that we were invading Iraq to rid the country of weapons of mass destruction, nor were we there to avenge 9/11. We knew we were there for one reason: to rid the world of a tyrant, and to give Iraq back to Iraqis.

None of us had even heard those arguments for going to war until we returned, and we still don't understand the confusion. To us, it was simple. The world needed to be rid of a man who committed mass murder against an entire people, and our country was the only one that could project that much power that far and with that kind of precision. We don't make policy decisions; we carry them out. And none of





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us had the slightest doubt about how right and good our actions were.

The war was the right thing to do then, and in hindsight it was still the right thing to do. We can't overthrow every murderous tyrant in the world, but when we can overthrow one, we should. Take it from someone who was there, and who stood to lose everything. We must, and will, stay the course. We owe it to the Iraqis, and to the world.

Stan Coerr  
San Diego, Calif.

**James Fallows replies:**

*I am grateful for Stan Coerr's eloquent letter, and for his defense of the war from a soldier's perspective. I would say three things in response.*

*First, it is not quite true that no combatants have previously expressed their views. News accounts routinely quote both officers and enlisted soldiers. In this magazine Robert Kaplan and several other authors have quoted men and women in uniform in Iraq. I have interviewed many soldiers after their return. Some agree with Major Coerr about the overall necessity and justice of the war. Some do not.*

*Second, what soldiers are told before going into battle is important, as Major Coerr says. It explains the cause for which they will kill and risk being killed. But what the civilian public and its elected representatives are told is also important. It provides the rationale for democratic assent to war. What the soldiers in Iraq were told—that they were removing a tyrant—has turned out to be true. What the public was told—that there was an intolerable threat from Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction—has turned out to be false. This is significant because the false claim was the basis for public and political support of the war. (It is worth remembering that in his 2003 State of the Union speech, just before the war began, President Bush devoted more than 2,000 words to the need for regime change in Iraq. Only about a hundred words touched on the human-rights questions that Major Coerr mentions. The rest of the passage was about the WMD threat. For instance: "Imagine those nineteen hijackers with other weapons and other plans—this time armed by Saddam Hussein. It would take one vial, one canister, one crate slipped into this country to bring a day of horror*

*like none we have ever known. We will do everything in our power to make sure that that day never comes.")*

*Third, the article to which Major Coerr is responding, "Blind Into Baghdad," said nothing about the case for waging war. Instead it concerned the Administration's almost inexplicable failure to apply any of the careful plans for the postwar occupation of Iraq that had been developed throughout the U.S. government.*

**Weather Report**

In his response to my letter (September *Atlantic*) concerning his article on Wayne Shorter ("A Real Gone Guy," June *Atlantic*), Francis Davis writes, "Exactly when Shorter quit Weather Report has always been ambiguous." He didn't exactly quit; the band dissolved after its 1984 tour. No public performances occurred after that. Weather Report had a contractual obligation to provide Columbia with one more recording, so in 1985 the group went into the studio to record *This Is This*. Later in 1985 Shorter went on tour with what was then his working band (which in fact was a working band, even if not "permanent") to support *Atlantis*, a tour that lasted through 1986. I hate to nitpick on such seemingly trivial issues, but all these things are a matter of public record.

Michael McLaughlin  
Chicago, Ill.

**Francis Davis replies:**

*Why is it that whenever someone says he hates to nitpick, that's precisely what he intends? The difference between "working" and "permanent" bands is a matter of semantics, and the other points Michael McLaughlin raises are minutiae, of interest only to him and other diehard Weather Report fans.*

**Florence of Arabia**

The excerpt from Christopher Buckley's novel *Florence of Arabia* (September *Atlantic*) is most entertaining. Did Buckley take his title from Noël Coward's witticism about Peter O'Toole, or is the title a coincidence? Two versions of Coward's witticism are extant: "If they put any more blue shadow

under [O'Toole's] eyes, he'll be Florence of Arabia" and "If he'd been any prettier, they'd have to call it *Florence of Arabia*."

Jon Kite  
Sèvres, France

**Christopher Buckley replies:**

*Coward's remark—version No. 2—is the epigraph of the novel. But I wish I'd used version No. 1.*

**Advice & Consent**

Shades of William Randolph Hearst and the Spanish-American War! What century does Robert Kaplan ("Five Days in Fallujah," July/August *Atlantic*) live in? Denigrate the enemy! Glorify our brave, outgunned lads! Matter-of-fact readiness to die! Look at the filth Iraqis live in! Look how they hide among women and children and taunt us! See our courtly commanders' compassion for civilians! Look how we have wads of cash for compensation! The Lord blesses us and not them, in their radical hell! I know a good Muslim from a bad, and these are bad! You could tell we were going to be attacked by the way they wouldn't open their shops as we stormed their city with fixed bayonets! Imperial obligations! The noble lad died talking on the phone to his dad! O the pathos of empire!

Scott Spellerberg  
Stockholm, Sweden

Political debates are almost useless, because, as James Fallows writes ("When George Meets John," July/August *Atlantic*), "'They are about emotional identification'—projecting a personality, a bearing, and a world view that voters find appealing." The reality is that political candidates manipulate their image and obscure ideas on television.

It's not surprising that President Bush's energy is in campaigning and refining his demonstration of resolve and strength. He is the consummate image maker: non-intellectual guy, rancher, wartime President in flight gear. Given the Bush circle's ability to control the debate process, it would be



naive for Americans to think they could get more than a feeling. In our inertia we do not demand more.

In this realm of perception, how distinguishable is John Kerry from George Bush? Senator Kerry voted for the war in Iraq. His explanation of his vote sounds equivocal in sound bites. He was misled, but he's not wrong. It seems that he would fix his predecessor's mistakes.

Neither man appears willing to substantively alter U.S. policy regarding Israel. This is not insignificant, considering that America's enemies have implied and stated that Israel is a crucial factor in the genesis of the terrorism crisis.

Asymmetric warfare? We have here two individuals who are first cousins in terms of class. We assign legitimacy to them because their wealth, sex, and race fit our perception of what an American President is. The clash of personalities will be interesting to pundits and academics and to the mainstream media that accept the manufactured context of a televised political debate as a real

forum. This enables the viewing public to focus on personal appeal rather than policy. We have all been co-opted.

*Nico Colson-Jones  
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Who is Benjamin Healy, and why have you kept him under wraps until now? The index on your back page is one of the most consistently funny things I've read in years. The gags buried in that fine print rank right up there with those quickly flashed signs and billboards that writers for *The Simpsons* love to toss off, but Healy deserves much more credit, because he does it alone and packs dozens of gags into a single page.

*Joe Claro  
Little Neck, N.Y.*

I suspect that in telling her father that Nationalist Chinese protesters were chanting "Down with Mayo" ("More Nixon Tapes," by James Warren, September *Atlantic*), Tricia Nixon was accurately reporting how the Nationalist Chinese chose to pronounce Mao's

name. It's a clever insult. Although we may think of the abbreviation for mayonnaise, any Chinese speaker would immediately have a different image: *mayo* is how one says "no" in Mandarin Chinese in response to questions beginning "Does s/he have ..." or "Do we/you have ...". Thus the Nationalists were making a jab at Mao—one that was subtle to us, the host country, but very pointed to the PRC Chinese. Imagine calling our President "President Doesn't-Have-Any."

*Jamie Hook  
Princeton, N.J.*

#### **Editors' note:**

*In last month's Letters to the Editor, Paul Maslin's reply to Nan Doyle was edited in a way that inadvertently changed his meaning. The sentence in question should have read: "Nearly nine in ten Iowans caucused for a candidate who opposed President Bush's request for additional funding for Iraq—as Dean did rhetorically, and Kerry and Edwards did with their Senate votes."*

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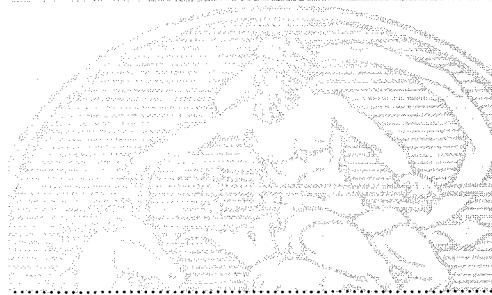
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## COMMENT

### **After the Fall**

*What will happen to the losing party after the election?*

BY CHUCK TODD

A famous football coach once declared that "winning isn't everything, it's the only thing," and few lines could better capture the attitude prevalent in American politics right now. The quotation referred to gridiron rivalries, but one would be hard pressed to find greater determination and resolve to win than that which exists in the battle between Democrats and Republicans that culminates on November 2.

Since at least the time of the invasion of Iraq—and for some, since the 2000 election—the politics in both parties has seemed focused on a single goal: winning the White House. Polls show that the electorate is more aware of the presidential race than it has been in years; that its views are more passionately held; that voters have made up their minds earlier than they usually do; and that after years of steady decline, the number of Americans who participate in this election is certain to soar. But hidden by this intense desire to win is a reality whose consequences no one seems willing to contemplate: come Election Day, one party will lose.

What then? The answer almost certainly is internal chaos and collapse for the losing party, whichever it may be. So firmly ingrained is the combat mentality that neither party believes the opposing candidate is capable of "winning" the election—only that its own candidate or campaign is capable of losing it. Which means that regardless of which party loses, the recriminations will resemble, in the words of Chris Lehane, an adviser to Al Gore's failed 2000 campaign, "the scene in the classic western *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* when everyone turns on each other and begins blasting away."

The upheaval will be immediate. If John Kerry loses the election, the aftermath, like the campaign itself, will become a heated referendum on Iraq—and on whether Kerry took a clear enough position. The left wing of the Democratic Party has held itself largely in check since 2000, directing its anger first at the Supreme Court (for the ruling that gave the Republicans the election) and then at President Bush, rather than at moderates and hawks in its own party. That restraint will collapse. And the rift between liberals and moderates that Bill Clinton (in one way) and George Bush (in another) each helped bridge for a time will once again break wide open. A Kerry loss will most likely also signal the return of the liberal standard-



bearer Howard Dean, whose decision to fall in line behind Kerry struck many party insiders as an attempt to rehabilitate his own image. Moderates or New Democrats who supported the war will not be nearly as quick to blame Iraq for Kerry's loss as they will to blame Kerry himself. The clash between the party's two power centers could thrust it back to the prelapsarian period in the 1980s before the arrival of Bill Clinton.

In fact, not even he may be immune from the backlash. A Kerry loss will quickly turn into a referendum on Clintonism—specifically (some liberals will argue) on the campaign strategy he bequeathed to Kerry. Many on the left view Kerry's complicated Iraq position as too clever by half, a dangerous attempt to emulate Clinton's talent for triangulation on the part of a man lacking the political charisma that enabled the former President to triumph.

## **Come Election Day, one party will lose. What then? The answer almost certainly is internal chaos and collapse for the losing party.**

Although old splits may re-open, new ones threaten as well. The current campaign could presage another struggle in the Democratic Party, this one between insiders and activists. The latter—who fueled Dean's candidacy in 2003 and Kerry's financial juggernaut in 2004—hold greater sway than many establishment Democrats understand. And the capacity the Internet provides to raise money and organize makes these “entrepreneurial Democrats” an ascendant power in the party.

But politics boils down to personality, and it abhors a vacuum. The current campaign has put forward a host of possible future stars that includes governors (such as Bill Richardson, of New Mexico, and Tom Vilsack, of Iowa), senators (Evan Bayh, of Indiana, and, soon, Barack Obama, of Illinois), and even former presidential aspirants (Dean, Wesley Clark, and possibly Al Gore), who will rush to position themselves as national figures. But the two who will emerge soonest

are John Edwards and Hillary Clinton, both expected to pursue the 2008 Democratic nomination in the event of a Democratic loss this year. The possibilities for drama and intrigue are many—beginning in 2006, when Clinton's presidential ambitions will be complicated by first having to defend her Senate seat, and perhaps further complicated if the Republicans field a big-time challenger. Her path will only be made harder by the conviction, sure to take hold if Kerry loses, that no Democrat from the Northeast can win the presidency—not even a Clinton.

The turmoil in the Republican Party could be even worse. Conservatives seem wholly unprepared for the possibility of a Bush loss. As with the Democrats, repercussions would focus first on the issue of Iraq, and a campaign for regime change aimed at the neoconservatives atop the party's for-

eign-policy establishment will be swift. Repudiation of those most closely associated with Iraq—Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Douglas Feith, and perhaps even Dick Cheney—will arrive from almost every corner of the coalition, from isolationists like Pat Buchanan to internationalists like Chuck Hagel.

The collateral damage would extend even to the Bush family; it's hard to imagine Republicans nominating Jeb Bush and risking the possibility of a *third* single-term Bush President. Instead we should expect the rise of a handful of new coalitions: a group of moderates, tough on taxes and terrorism, including Arnold Schwarzenegger, Mitt Romney, and George Pataki; a re-emergence of the party's social-conservative wing, which might produce its own great hope for 2008, someone like Senator Sam Brownback, of Kansas; and an internationalist faction, newly empowered by a Bush loss to counterbalance the

neoconservatives, most likely headed by Chuck Hagel, of Nebraska. Add to these the personalities that defy easy classification: Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, and Tom DeLay, all of whom would command powerful followings.

The failed strategy behind a Bush loss would be the other obvious focal point: Karl Rove. From the moment Rove learned that Bush had lost the popular vote in 2000, he has single-mindedly pursued the goal of increasing the Republicans' base. As libertarians and moderates have pointed out, doing so alienates Bush from the ever elusive swing voters—and if their failure to come around to Bush is seen as the cause of his loss, the failure will be attributable to Rove. But so far, few Republican insiders believe that a loss will spell Rove's doom. By now too much of the party infrastructure bears Rove's signature to deny him a major role. Many believe he has already chosen a horse for his next race: Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, likely to be the chief antagonist of a President Kerry.

Should they lose, the Republicans—like the Democrats, if that is their fate—will regroup and return to the tactics of the past. They'll organize behind a single unifying principle: hating the President. And they'll be powered by the kind of Internet-funded activists who came into their own during the 2004 campaign, and whom not even Bill Clinton had to face.

All this suggests that whichever party loses the election will face the sort of ideological struggle that seems to occur every generation or so in politics—the Republican bloodletting that followed Barry Goldwater's loss in 1964, the crisis of identity in the Democratic Party that followed Michael Dukakis's loss in 1988. And this time, given the tightness of the race and the promise of victory within reach of either party, the shock will be greater still. The final weeks of this campaign will doubtless stretch out like a lifetime—and for the losing party, the next four years will seem like an eternity. ■

*Chuck Todd is the editor-in-chief of Hotline and an Atlantic contributing editor.*

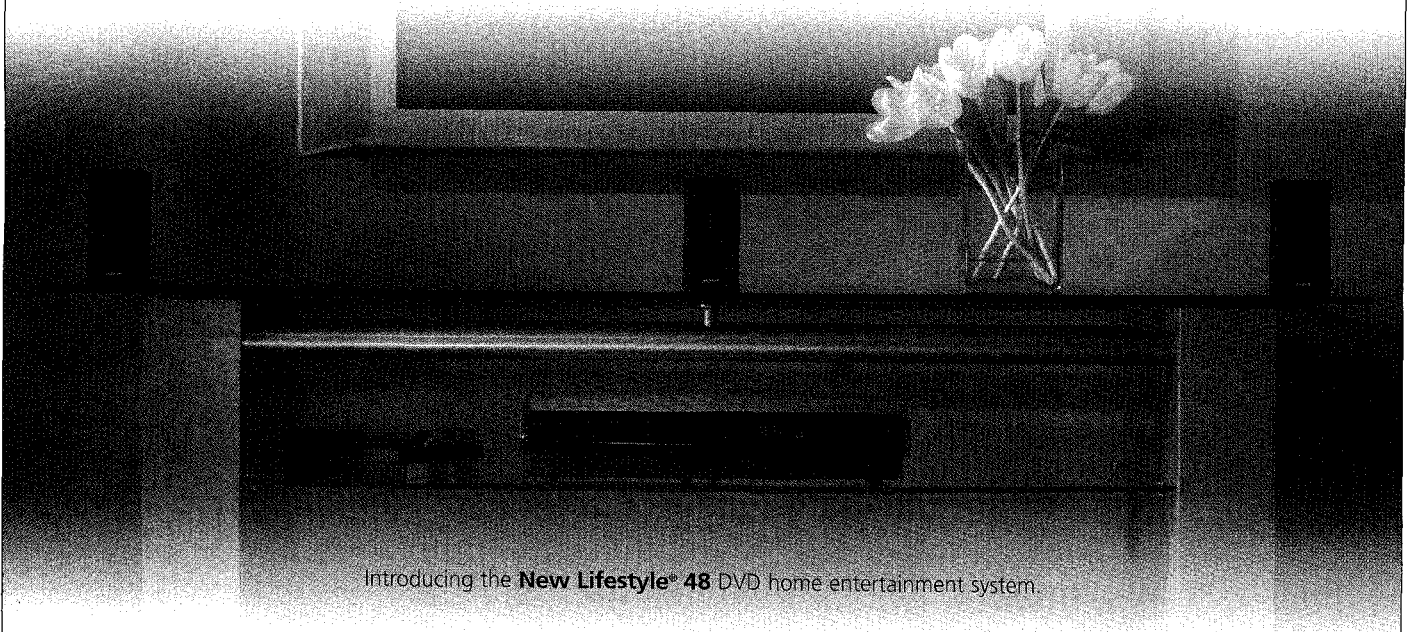


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# The Media and the Military

*American reporters would shudder to think that they harbor class prejudice—but they do*

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

Ever since the American-led invasion of Iraq last year, when hundreds of journalists were embedded with military units, people in media circles have been debating whether journalists lose their professional detachment under such circumstances and begin to identify too closely with the troops they are covering. A journalist I met recently in Iraq told me that whenever he returns from a stint with the military, he gets a string of queries from journalism professors, wanting to know if embedded journalists have become, in effect, “whores” of the armed forces.

Having spent much of the past two years embedded with U.S. military units around the world, I find such fears to be a case of class prejudice. As with many forms of prejudice, the perpetrators are only vaguely aware of it, if at all.

Even with the embed phenomenon the media still manifest a far more intimate—one might say incestuous—relationship with politicians, international diplomats, businesspeople, academics, and humanitarian-relief workers than with the U.S. military. Given that all these groups push various political agendas, it is fair to ask why *embedding* has struck a raw nerve.

The common denominator among the non-military groups is that they derive from the same elevated social and economic strata of their societies. Even relief workers are often young people from well-off families, motivated by idealism and a desire for adventure. An American journalist would most likely find it easier to strike up a conversation with a relief worker from another Western country than with a U.S. Marine or soldier, especially if that Marine or soldier were a noncommissioned officer. This is not necessarily because the journalist and the relief worker share a liberal outlook; a neoconservative pundit would fare no better with the NCO, for

example. The NCO is part of another America—an America that the media elite is blind to and alienated from.

I am not talking about the poor. The media establishment has always been solicitous of the poor, and through much fine reporting over the years has become intimately familiar with them. I am talking about the working class and slightly above: that vast, forgotten multitude of Americans, especially between the two cosmopolitan coasts, with whom journalists in major media



markets now have fewer and fewer opportunities to engage in a sustained, meaningful way except by embedding with the military.

The U.S. military—particularly at the level of NCOs, who are the guardians of its culture and traditions—is a world of beer, cigarettes, instant coffee, and chewing tobacco. It is composed of people who hunt, drive pickups, use profanity as an element of ordinary speech and yet have a simple, sure, demonstrative belief in the Almighty. Though this is by and large a politically conservative world, neoconservatives might not feel particularly comfortable in it. Some neocons, who have

taken democracy and turned it into an ideological ism, wouldn't sit well with Army and Marine civil-affairs and psy-ops officers who pay lip service to new democratic governing councils in Iraq and then go behind their backs to work with traditional sheikhs. The meat-and-potatoes military is about practicalities: it does whatever is necessary to, say, restore stability in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, Army Special Forces work regularly with undemocratic warlords and tribal militias, and see no contradiction with their own larger belief in democracy. Arguing over abstractions and refining differences between realism and idealism is the luxury of a well-to-do theory class.

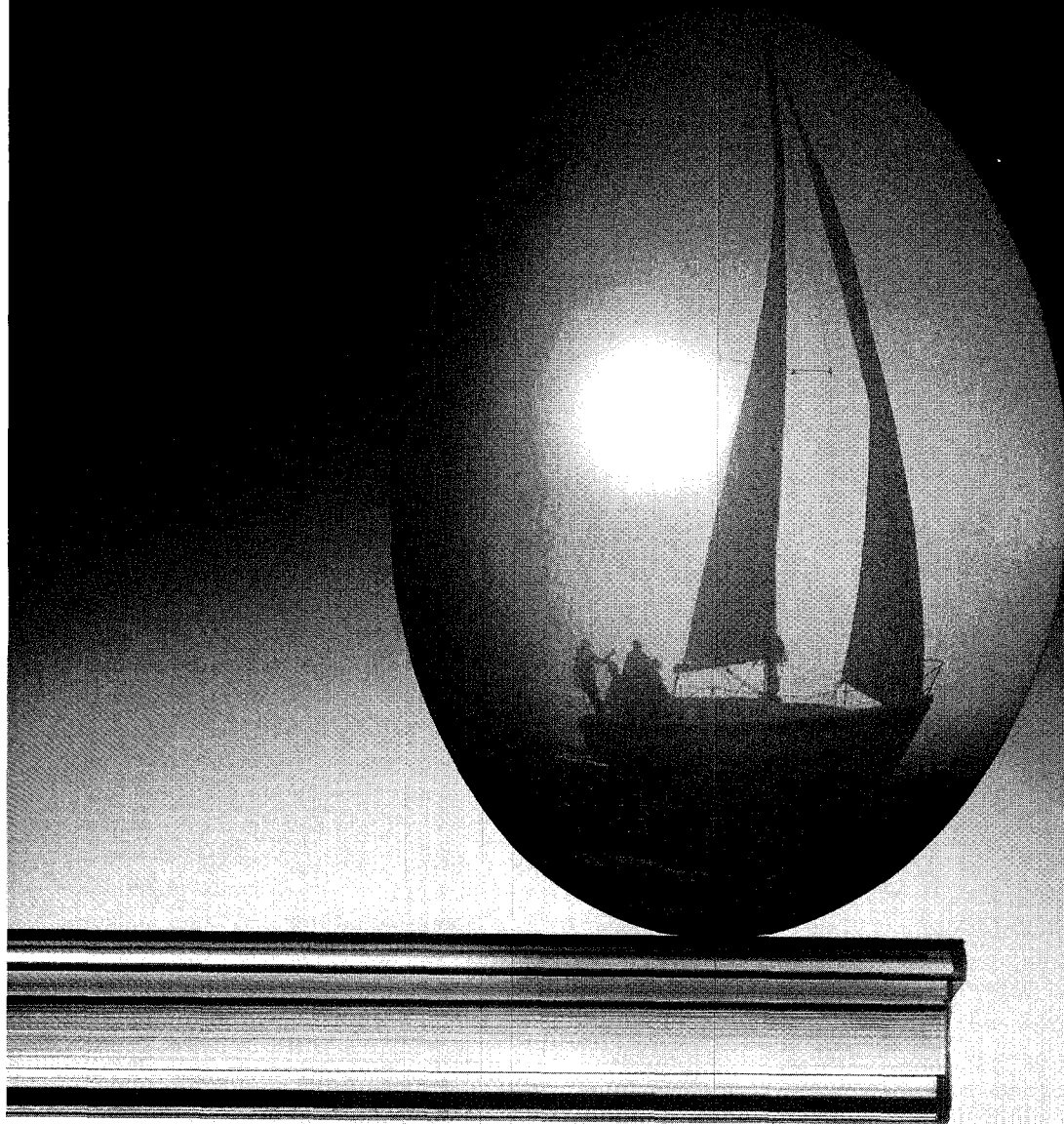
The military is an unpretentious environment in which, for instance, the word “folks” is commonly used for people both good and bad. When, after 9/11, President George W. Bush drew snickers from some writers for his reference to al-Qaeda terrorists as “those folks,” it was an indication not of Bush's poor speech habits but of the regional and class prejudices afflicting the media establishment.

The starkly differing attitudes toward Bush that one encounters within the media and the military go to the heart of this class divide. You may not get much of a sense of it at the Pentagon, or at military academies such as West Point and Annapolis. The Pentagon is about as indicative of the rest of

the military as Washington is of the rest of America; West Point and Annapolis are about as indicative of U.S. military schools as Harvard and Yale are of colleges and universities across the heartland. To know what soldiers, Marines, and other uniformed Americans think, visit the housing for young NCOs at a base such as Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Fort Campbell, Kentucky; Camp Pendleton, California; or Fort Hood, Texas. Visit the Army Sergeants-Major Academy in El Paso, Texas, or the Army and Marine infantry schools at Fort Benning, Georgia, and Twentynine Palms, California. Visit U.S. barracks and military chow halls around the world.

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NCOs in these places appreciate President Bush, whatever his manifold weaknesses, for subjective cultural reasons. His voice is a clear, simple one that speaks of a clash between good and evil, between good guys and bad guys. Bush talks like a believer; he is unabashedly Christian. He says openly that it is all right to kill the enemy, which goes a long way with military fighting units. One Air Force master sergeant told me, "I reject the notion that Bush is inarticulate. He is more articulate than Clinton. When Bush says something, he's clear enough that you argue about whether you agree with him or not. When Clinton talks, you argue over what he really meant."

Bush, from an elite East Coast family, connects with sergeants and corporals in the same visceral, almost tribal way that I saw Israeli Prime Minister

southern Midwest and the Great Plains dominate the military, and the only New Yorkers and Bostonians one is likely to meet in the barracks are from working-class areas, heavily Irish and Hispanic, the urban Northeast, with its frequent air connections to Europe, is where the media cluster. Whereas the military is a lower-middle-class world in which a too-prominent sense of self is frowned on, the journalistic world too often represents the ultimate *me, me, me* culture of today's international elite.

The military and the media occupy distinct cultural and economic layers. For the military this doesn't really present a problem. Its culture is appropriate to its task, which is to defend the homeland, through the violent use of force if necessary. The troops who do this require nationalism more than they do cosmopolitanism, though a bit more

of the latter would certainly be healthy. They also require a religious spirit that is both martial and compassionate, a requirement that the Old Testament orientation of southern evan-

gelicalism satisfies nicely. The soldiers I have met harbor no particular resentments. They are middle-class in their minds, whether or not they are in reality; the military offers a telling demonstration that class resentment is mainly an obsession of the elite.

But the media do have a problem. They are supposed to explain what is happening in a diverse world, which is difficult to do if journalists all hail from the same social and economic background. The media establishment may claim eclectic origins, but whether a journalist grew up in New York or Hong Kong or Mexico City matters less than you might think if in any case he is affluent and well educated: the New Yorker will have more in common with his colleagues from Asia or Latin America than he will with someone from a working-class background in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

To deny that this is an issue for the media is to deny a basic truth of writing: though journalists assume the mantle of professional objectivity,

a writer brings his entire life experience to bear on every story and situation. A journalist may seek different points of view, but he shapes and portrays those viewpoints from only one angle of vision: his own.

The blue-collar element that once kept print journalism honest has been gone for some time. Journalists of an earlier era may have been less professional, but they were better connected with the rest of the country. The mannered intrigues of the well-heeled Washington and New York media world have come to resemble those of the exclusive Manhattan society that Edith Wharton chronicled a hundred years ago.

How many members of this world really know people in the active-duty military or the National Guard? The East Coast media's social circle is much more likely to include aging sixties protesters than Vietnam veterans. Of course there are exceptions to all of this, but exceptions don't cut it.

Yes, the editorial boards of prestigious newspapers regularly invite top military brass up to their offices, and a contingent of colonels are always studying at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and similar places. Furthermore, the military correspondents of the major newspapers are in a category by themselves in terms of considerable expertise and well-rooted personal relationships with military men and women. But such cross-fertilization does not go very deep in the larger scheme of things. Besides, generals and colonels are not really what the military is about.

So although some journalism professors may worry that military embedding is subverting the media, I would argue the contrary. The *Columbia Journalism Review* recently ran an article about the worrisome gap between a wealthy media establishment and ordinary working Americans. One solution is embedding, which offers the media perhaps their last, best chance to reconnect with much of the society they claim to be a part of. ■

*Robert D. Kaplan, a correspondent for The Atlantic, is the author of Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos (2001). He is writing a series of articles about American troops in far-flung parts of the world.*

## In the military world an overly prominent sense of self is frowned on; in the journalistic world it's too often *me, me, me*.

Menachem Begin, a sophisticated European Jew who relaxed to the music of Chopin, connect with the tough, working-class Oriental Jews of Israel's slums and development towns a quarter century ago. The Oriental Jews, like American NCOs, were looking not for subtlety or complexity but for clarity. *How deeply does this man believe? Will he fight to the finish?*

In a recent article in *The National Interest*, Samuel Huntington, of Harvard University, writes about the divide in American society between the elites, who are cosmopolitans, and the mass of citizens, who are nationalists. The media and the armed forces, respectively, are poster children for these two categories. The world of the media is just as easily defined as that of the military. Journalists are increasingly global citizens. If they themselves do not have European and other foreign passports, their spouses, friends, and acquaintances increasingly do. Whereas the South and the adjacent Bible Belt of the



## BRIEF LIVES

# The Faisal Factor

*A talk-show host on al-Jazeera targets those he believes are the worst enemies the Arabs have: themselves*

BY JEFFREY TAYLER

According to polls in the Arab press, the most popular talk show on al-Jazeera—the world's most widely watched Arab TV station—is *Al-Ittijah al-Mu'akis* (*The Opposite Direction*). Broadcast live each week since December of 1996, when al-Jazeera first came on the air, the show is hosted by Faisal al-Kasim, a bespectacled forty-two-year-old Syrian. Al-Kasim moderates while two guests debate a topic of his choosing; viewers join in by telephone, fax, and e-mail. No other Arab television personality is as controversial, as despised, or as revered as al-Kasim.

Headquartered in Doha, the capital of the tiny, thumb-shaped Gulf state of Qatar, al-Jazeera draws an audience of some 45 million viewers around the world, including eight million in Europe, where subscriptions doubled after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It operates apparently without editorial constraint from the liberal Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who founded the station to help reverse the authoritarian legacy of his father, whom he overthrew bloodlessly in 1995. The spirit of al-Jazeera's reportage often accords with the anti-Western sentiments pervading both the Arab street and the more educated milieus of the Islamic world, especially when it comes to Osama bin Laden and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. But al-Kasim keeps his guns trained on what he regards as the true banes of his people: corrupt Arab governments and pernicious myths among Arabs about themselves. He has a penchant for tackling taboo topics on his show, and the opinions that he and his guests express about them can seem wildly iconoclastic (often, that is to say, true) to viewers brought up on state-controlled media.

I first met al-Kasim late one muggy evening last May, at his villa in a gated Doha residential complex. He appears

an unlikely renegade. On television he wears a suit and tie, but he greeted me at home in a baseball cap, a T-shirt, and blue jeans. He is fair-complexioned and diminutive, with trimmed brown hair combed over a balding pate, and he exudes a boyish enthusiasm.

We sat down to a silver tray of tea and sweets, and al-Kasim told me of the cosmopolitan life he has led. Born in a village near Damascus, he spent twelve years in England, where he earned a



Ph.D. in English literature at Hull University. He holds Gore Vidal and Noam Chomsky in high regard, considering them to be the consciences of the United States; like Vidal especially, he is fascinated by conspiracy theories. He came to broadcasting by chance when, in 1988, he was introduced to the head of BBC Radio's Arabic Service at a party, and was invited to work for the BBC. In 1996, along with many of his Arab colleagues at the BBC, he moved to Qatar to begin work with al-Jazeera, eager to take part in the region's first experiment with free journalism. His goal? "To change the status quo, which is horrible politically, religiously, economically, in every way."

Al-Kasim's first show, he says, "dissected" the Gulf Cooperation Council (the league of oil-rich monarchies and emirates that are responsible for some of the most closed regimes in the Middle East) "like a corpse," and since then *The Opposite Direction* has addressed an array of previously unmentionable questions in the Arab world, in terms ranging from the contrarian to the outlandish. Is Arab unity an unattainable myth? When was life better, under colonial or Arab rule? ("Eighty-six percent of our viewers who called in said they'd rather be re-colonized," al-Kasim told me. "The Algerians would welcome Chirac, if he decided to return.") Was King Hassan II of Morocco an agent of the Mossad? Should polygamy have a place in the modern Arab world? On that last show two female guests,

one liberal and one traditional, traded insults during a commercial break and then began shouting at each other once back on the air, until the traditionalist stomped off the set. "What do you do when someone has been holding his hand over your mouth for years and suddenly removes it?" al-Kasim asked me rhetorically when describing that episode. "You go wild!"

Going wild is hardly behavior that Arab governments tend to encourage. Five Arab countries have withdrawn their ambassadors from Qatar to protest al-Kasim's broadcasts, and the KCB-like domestic-security services of a number of countries have at times prevented guests from flying to Doha to



appear on the show. In these instances al-Kasim has proceeded anyway, taking phoned-in questions and also directing his cameras to an empty chair to embarrass the governments that forbid his guests from traveling.

"Doing this show is dangerous for me," al-Kasim told me. "I'm black-listed by many countries, and smear campaigns are launched against me." After he devoted an episode to the "Zionification" of Iraq under the U.S. occupation, al-Kasim alleges, the Iraqi National Congress issued death threats against him and spread rumors on the Internet that he had sold out to Saddam Hussein (who was, oddly enough, a fan of his). A show he did on King Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia, he says, left the Saudi government "seeing no difference between Satan and me." About all that seems to protect him is his dual Syrian-British citizenship, which dis-

the subject of the savage Arab prisons of *Abu Qarib* [roughly, "close to home"] instead of talking about the American [abuses in] Abu Ghraib? Shouldn't we thank the American media for exposing the practices in American Iraqi prisons ... in the hope that perhaps our Arab media might expose Arab security services, with their Nazi-like actions against Arab inmates?"

Al-Kasim arranged for me to watch the broadcast of the show from the control room in al-Jazeera's headquarters—a modest complex of boxy low buildings of white cement and blue-tinted glass, located on the dusty grounds of Qatar's state television station. He met me in the newsroom, wearing a dark-blue suit and a red-and-white paisley tie, his face dusted with the makeup he himself applies. One of his guests soon arrived—Fuad Alam, an Egyptian general and a former assistant

Ghraib because they're committing far worse atrocities in their own prisons?" (The vote, announced at show's end, revealed that 84 percent of respondents thought so.)

Al-Kasim turned to Chouket, who started off hot. "The record of Arab regimes," he said, "is disgraceful and outrageous ... worse than that of the occupier or the colonialist ... We export not only oil but techniques and tools of torture ... Our states, run by ministries of the interior and the security services, are regimes bereft of legitimacy and based on violations of dignity and human rights." His accusations applied, he said, to Arab states "from the Atlantic Ocean to the Persian Gulf." He segued into testimony describing "standard daily practices" in all Arab prisons, which he depicted as "man-made hells" where prisoners hang by their ankles and are skinned alive; where savage dogs "rip chunks of living flesh from inmates' bodies"; where torturers tear out their subjects' fingernails and hair, administer electric shocks, hack off body parts, deprive prisoners of food and sleep, and submerge them in dungeons filled with icy water.

Al-Kasim then turned to General Alam, addressing him respectfully as "your eminence the general." As Alam responded, he emphasized his words with flourishes of a pen, drawing attention to his meaty and powerful hands. Chouket's assertions, he said dismissively, were "far from reality and the truth," and he declared it "slandorous" to claim that there is "a culture of torture in the Arab world." Rather, he said, "as in every country on earth," there are "excesses" and "deviations." Nowhere in the Arab world are abuses practiced methodically, he argued—in contrast to what goes on "in Abu Ghraib and all American prisons without exception." Predictably, he soon moved on to "safer" subjects, complaining that the United States claims to be the "defender of democracy" even as it "attacks Arab and Islamic civilization and culture"—and as it supports Ariel Sharon.

Al-Kasim countered, "But Arab leaders destroy entire cities and kill thousands [of their own citizens] ...

## Some Arab countries have prevented guests from appearing on the show, but in these instances al-Kasim directs questions to an empty chair, to embarrass those governments.

suades regimes that are reluctant to tangle with the bearer of a Western passport.

The Arabic words for "rotten," "disgusting," "foul," and "corrupt" peppered al-Kasim's speech whenever Arab governments came up in our conversation. But what, I asked, about the Abu Ghraib scandal, for example? Didn't the Americans merit the same censure?

Al-Kasim had opposed the invasion of Iraq, but he was loath to make comparisons of this sort. "Look, we [Arabs] have always been talking about America and the flaws in its democracy. But it's high time we talked about our *own* illnesses."

During the week of my visit al-Jazeera was running promos for the upcoming episode of *The Opposite Direction*. In them, al-Kasim told me, he asked questions that his viewers weren't hearing anywhere else on Middle Eastern airwaves. "Isn't it fitting," he said to the camera, "that we address

interior minister whom one knowledgeable source had described to me spitefully as a "war criminal," a "specialist in torture." A silver-haired septuagenarian in a drab olive suit, with droopy eyelids and phlegmatic mannerisms, Alam bore a swarthy resemblance to a Brezhnev-era Party boss. Facing off with him would be the Tunisian Khaled Chouket, the director of the Holland-based Center for the Support of Democracy in the Arab World. Chouket, in his thirties and with a pugilist's build, walked in wearing a charcoal-gray suit, his eyes dark and fierce, his black hair cropped to a V in the middle of his brow.

Soon the cameras rolled. After a provocative pre-recorded introduction and brief biographies of his guests, al-Kasim introduced a live Internet poll of viewers on a question related to the topic of the day (a feature unknown in the Arab media before *The Opposite Direction*). In this instance the question was "Are Arab regimes refraining from condemning the abuse in Abu





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How many Israelis has Sharon killed?"

Chouket interjected with a question one rarely hears in the Arab media: "How can we struggle against Israel with tyrannical and authoritarian regimes that violate people, with oppressed peoples that hate themselves, with terrorized peoples?"

The episode's climax came midway through, when Chouket, angered by the general's refusal to recognize the prevalence of torture in Egyptian prisons, shouted, "In Egypt in the 1960s, when entire political groups [were being destroyed], you were a member of the *mukhabarat* [secret police] and in charge of an organization condemned to *this day* for crimes against humanity and war crimes!" He soon began lamenting the state of Arab society. "Our political life is closed, and our freedoms usurped, and our people are oppressed and fearful, and if you don't say what the ruler wants, you're exiled beyond the sun!"

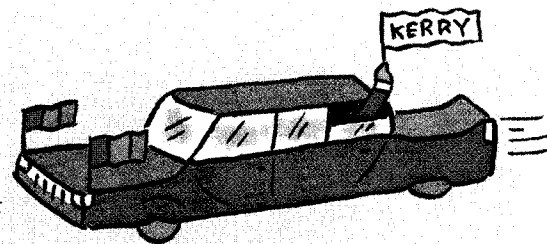
The show was refreshing in the liveliness and openness of its debate, and its being beamed around the Arab world simply could not have been imagined even a decade ago. Yet it was also emblematic of the problems afflicting Arab society—pitting a grim, powerful, and reality-denying general against a man who can question authority only because he lives in Holland. After the show was over and the guests had departed, al-Kasim and I walked out into the humid night. As we discussed the evening's conversation, I asked him if he hadn't let the Americans off too easily about Abu Ghraib. He dismissed the question. "The U.S. put the Japanese in camps during World War II; it had McCarthyism; and now they have Bush," he said. "But it will all pass. Democracy corrects itself." His mission, he clearly felt, was to help this process along. But standing on the sidewalk that night, outside the studio and far from the cameras that take him into the homes of millions, al-Kasim seemed very much alone. ■

*Jeffrey Tayler is an Atlantic correspondent and the author of three books, including Glory in a Camel's Eye (2003). His fourth book, Angry Wind: Through Muslim Black Africa by Truck, Bus, Boat, and Camel, will be published next year.*

AT LARGE

## FOREIGN LEADERS AND KERRY

*Do they really like him? Here's what they—or, anyway, people—tell me*



There's one presidential-election issue that will not be decided in America's polling booths—because foreign leaders can't vote. But who do the political bigwigs of other countries want elected? It is a question arising from a realistic assessment of America's place in the community of nations. Either that or it's a question arising from a Rock the Vote campaign that ran amok and enlisted Bavarian oompah bands, Edith Piaf, and the muezzins atop the minarets of Kandahar.

Republicans took the latter view when, in March, Senator John Kerry was reported—erroneously, as it turned out—to have told a small group of supporters in Hollywood, Florida, "I've met foreign leaders who can't go out and say this publicly, but, boy, they look at you and say, 'You've got to win this, you've got to beat this guy, we need a new policy.'"

Colin Powell challenged Kerry to name these officials. "If he can't list names," Powell said, "then perhaps he should find something else to talk about."

Apparently, what Kerry had said was "more leaders," not "foreign leaders." But, going on the defensive, the senator defended what he'd said, whether he'd said it or not. "I've had conversations with a number of foreign leaders up until the present moment, and I'm not going to betray the confidences of those conversations. But I've had conversations with leaders, and also friends of mine who have met with leaders ..." And he said, "I think what I said was that I have heard from people around the world, leaders and people ..." The conservative *Washington Times* claimed that Kerry's most recent official trip abroad was in 2002, and that since then he and a foreign leader had been present in the same city only once, when New Zealand's Foreign Minister was in Washington. (Kerry's lack of a firm position on frozen leg-of-lamb imports—mere coincidence?)

It was a clumsy partisan swatfest, and it left the real question unanswered. Do foreign leaders want John Kerry to be President of the United States? Like the junior senator from Massachusetts, I've met with foreign leaders; or, anyway, had conversations with friends of mine

who have met with leaders; or—you know what I mean—I've heard from people around the world.

I, too, am not going to betray the confidences of those conversations. But the foreign leaders of a country that didn't go to war in Iraq but used to go to war a lot (think helmets with pickle spikes) strongly favor Kerry. They like his rollicking sense of humor. For example, campaigning in Las Vegas, Kerry made this joke, reported by *The New York Times*: "They tell me there are 15,000 or more people here. I'm happy to hear that, because I took the 'over' on 11,000." It is a gambling joke, with a clever mathematical turn.

In a nearby very large, very former superpower, an important leader has been won over. This Kremlin incumbent found both Kerry's speaking style and the Democratic convention to be comfortably familiar.

Elsewhere, the prominent dictator of a place that's to the north of the south part of this place supports Kerry even though the Senator's top national-security adviser, Rand Beers, told the Council on Foreign Relations, "Not to say that a Kerry Administration is talking about giving a lot of carrots to North Korea." Democrats are well known to have close ties to the entertainment industry. This cinema-obsessed strongman may have a chance to meet Julie Andrews at last.

Foreign leaders throughout the underdeveloped world are hoping for a Kerry victory. Having read Kerry's book, *A Call to Service*, and learned that the candidate is a WASP and Irish and Jewish and Catholic, they are confident that Kerry will also be black, Asian, Hispanic, Hindu, and Muslim.

Finally, there's a foreign leader of a country whose name rhymes with "underpants" who says (or so I've heard from people around the world, leaders and people), "I cannot say this publicly, *naturellement*, but when M. Kerry makes the fine distinctions between the 'met with,' the 'had conversations with,' the 'heard from,' I think: *Here is the intellect of the razor, the President Clinton of these times.*" —P.J. O'ROURKE



## Follow the Mullahs

*With theologians at the center of terrorist strategy, "forensic theology" is rapidly becoming a valuable intelligence tool*

BY STEPHEN GREY

Inside the Green Zone in Baghdad last winter I watched a coalition adviser study a 4,200-word communiqué purported to be from Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian suspected of links to al-Qaeda, whose network has claimed responsibility for the recent spate of beheadings and is the United States' most wanted enemy in Iraq. The essence of the screed had already been broadcast by the media: the author promised to draw the Iraqi people "into the furnace of battle," in order that "a real war will break out, God willing." The analyst, however, had little interest in the political content of the communiqué. An Arabist and a scholar of Islam, he was scrutinizing the language and religious references in the text in an effort to determine whether it was in fact written by al-Zarqawi. Many commentators believed that it had been put together by others—perhaps an intelligence agency or the Iraqi National Congress—in order to give credence to U.S. accusations of foreign involvement in terrorist actions within Iraq.

The analyst, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, disagreed. "This definitely fits Zarqawi's profile," he told me. "He is a highly educated man. This is real scholarship." He pointed to references to Ibn Taymiyya (1268–1328), a Syrian religious leader who declared *jihād* on the Mongols—who had taken much of the Middle East from the Arabs—even though the Mongols were by then Muslims themselves. In doing so Taymiyya had invoked a philosophy used by militants today to justify attacks on fellow Muslims. "It's just the sort of person that I expect Zarqawi is reading," the analyst said. "Taymiyya was also perniciously anti-Shiite."

The analyst is engaged in a new and increasingly important aspect of the fight against terrorism—one that might be called forensic theology. Authent-

icating terrorist documents is just one of its uses. It can also help identify perpetrators, and targets for surveillance, sometimes far more effectively than conventional intelligence practices. Its greatest potential, however, may be strategic: with theologians at the center of the battle, forensic theology may help us pinpoint the groups that present the greatest threat.



France was probably the first nation to engage in forensic theology, sometimes known as "ideological surveillance." Since 1986, when militants launched a wave of terror attacks in Paris, the French security services have worked with experts on Islam to learn the trademarks of extremist thought. These efforts have helped them to identify and disrupt a number of militant cells and to prevent more than twenty-five planned attacks. Last year, for example, religious experts listening to sermons in various mosques pinpointed three clerics as probable extremists. Police investigators found that all three had links to a terrorist group led by a Turkish militant, and they were ordered expelled from France.

Yigal Carmon is another pioneer in the field. A former chief anti-terrorism

adviser to Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Yitzhak Shamir, he currently directs the Middle East Media Research Institute, in Washington, D.C. MEMRI's fellows have pored over thousands of Islamic militant texts and sermons since the institute's founding, in 1998. They have been crucial in confirming the authenticity of many al-Qaeda statements and determining that others said to come from the group were fakes. For example, MEMRI's analysts found that a supposed al-Qaeda statement issued on March 12, which claimed responsibility for the Madrid bombings the day before, deviated from Osama bin Laden's scholarly Islamic style in several respects. Among other things, it termed the 9/11 attacks "events" rather than "raids" (a translation of the early-Islamic word *ghazwah*), and talked about foreign "agents" (a word common in the vocabulary of nationalist ideology), whereas bin Laden and his followers typically call their enemies "infidels." It also referred to the Madrid attacks as "messages," a word out of keeping with the way bin Laden casts his operations.

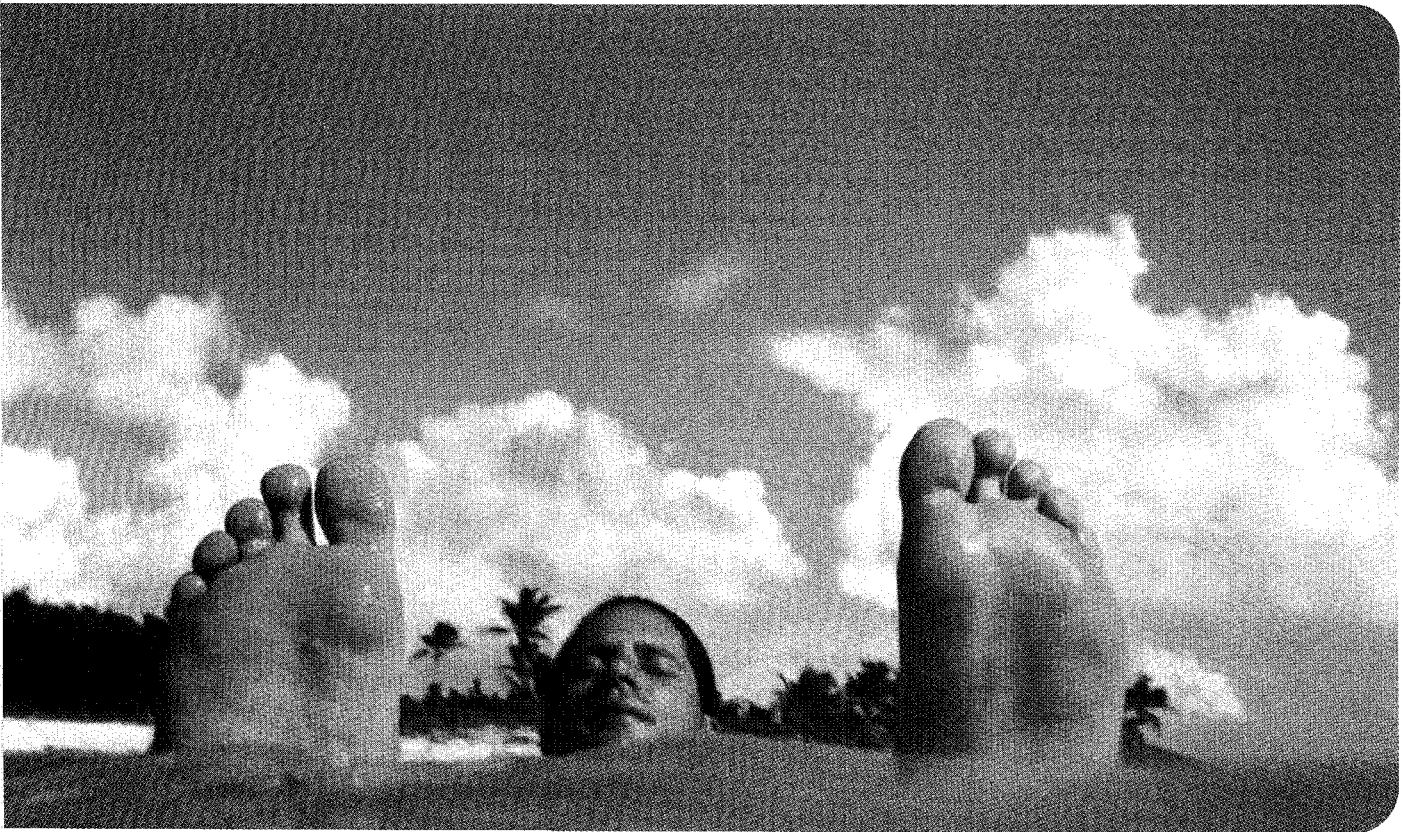
Religion, Carmon says, is not only a key to understanding the motivation of Islamic militants; it can also provide important clues at the scene of a crime. Some clues, he told me recently, are readily apparent to the educated eye. For instance, the very name of the Izz al-Din al-Qassam mosque, in Tampa, Florida, should have alerted authorities that the mosque's founder, Sami Arian, might be involved with Hamas. Al-Qassam led a Palestinian movement that attacked Jewish settlements in Palestine in the early 1930s, and one wing of Hamas is named the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades. As a result of wiretaps and other surveillance activities, al-Arian was arrested last year and charged with supporting terrorist activity.

Other clues are subtler, and deciphering them requires greater expertise. In 2002 an investigation by the Pittsburgh *Tribune-Review* exposed ties between Muslim students at the University of Pittsburgh and suspected terrorists. These ties might have been uncovered much sooner had analysts



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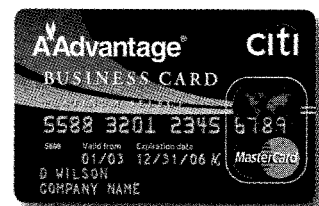
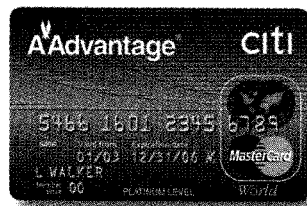


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## PRESIDENTIAL GIFTS

U.S. elected officials can't accept significant presents, as everyone knows, and such presents are particularly frowned on when foreign nationals are involved. But sometimes, when "non-acceptance would cause embarrassment to donor and U.S. government," the President of the United States just can't say no. Which is why George W. Bush, his family, and his senior staff have ended up the proud owners of the following gifts (among many, many others), as catalogued in a State Department registry.

- Original watercolor portraits of the forty-three Presidents of the United States, bound in a velvet book studded with precious gems, held in a wooden presentation case with an amber mosaic of the United States on the lid, from His Excellency Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation (value: \$45,000)

- Approximately 300 pounds of lamb, from His Excellency the President of the Argentine Nation and Mrs. Kirchner (value: \$1,500)

- 3.4 ounces of Christian Dior "Higher" after-shave lotion, 3.4 ounces of eau de toilette, and a 5.2-ounce bar of soap, from His Excellency Jacques Chirac, President of the French Republic (value: \$133)

- Two 13" sheathed daggers in a gold-and-silver inlaid design with ivory handles and gold chains, one presented to Chief of Staff Andrew Card and one to National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, from His Royal Highness Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (value: \$1,500 each)

- A 33" alabaster sculpture of Paris and Helen titled *The Flight From Carthage*, from his Excellency Silvio Berlusconi, President of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic (value: \$4,500)

- Desktop models of Marine One and the Royal British helicopters, from His Royal Highness Prince Andrew, Duke of York (value: \$500)

- A 41" x 60" mohair wall hanging depicting a village scene with children, from the First Lady of the Republic of Botswana, Mrs. Barbara Mogae (value: \$225)

- A 23-ounce Lady McDuffies Gourmet Lemon Cream Cheese Cake, from His Majesty Haji Hassanal Bolikiah Mu'izzaddin Waddaulah, Sultan and Yang Di-Pertuan of Brunei (value: \$41)

examined the Islamic student magazine, which from 1991 to 2000 contained quotations from Salman al-Awdah, and a related Web site that quotes Safar al-Hawali; both are Saudi clerics who have lent support to al-Qaeda. The political propaganda in the magazine was the usual stuff of such publications—exhortations to *jihad*, condemnations of the West, praise for Muslim fighters around the world—but the religious citations were not. Al-Awdah, for example, does not confine his support to *mujahideen* in places like Bosnia and Afghanistan but embraces the extension of *jihad* worldwide and accepts civilians and fellow Muslims as legitimate targets.

Islamic clerics are not only a source of general inspiration; most *jihadis* will not undertake a mission without first seeking approval from a religious leader, often a highly placed one. The Madrid bombers are known to have telephoned a London cleric for guidance. British and European intelligence agencies found that another London-based

been indicted by the Spanish police for running a cell in Madrid that aided the 9/11 hijackers.

Close study of Islamic thought can reveal important differences between radical networks. These differences can be discerned especially in their discussions of two highly contested concepts in Islamic philosophy: that of *taqfir*, or the idea of declaring a fellow Muslim an apostate (and thus a legitimate target); and that of self-defense, interpreted by al-Qaeda as justification for worldwide *jihad*. According to Alastair Crooke, the former European Union negotiator with Hamas and other radical Islamic groups, who is now working on a project to increase Western policymakers' understanding of Islam, many such groups, including Hamas and Hizbollah, are utterly opposed to the activities of bin Laden and Zarqawi—indeed, to any form of *jihad* outside what they regard as occupied territory. Yet the U.S. government classifies Hamas and

Hizbollah in the same terrorist category as al-Qaeda. "The biggest mistake the West makes is to disregard these differences and to demonize almost

## Religion can provide important clues at the scene of terrorist crimes, along with a key to the motivations behind them.

cleric, Abu Qatada, not only issued *fatwas* supporting terrorist activities (the most famous is a 1994 *fatwa* justifying the killing of women and children in Algeria) but also corresponded with and met the terrorists involved.

Starting in the late 1990s these *fatwas* identified Qatada as a candidate for surveillance. Police and intelligence officers traced his connections throughout Europe, and as a result several dozen militants, among them some in Qatada's immediate circle, were arrested and a series of planned attacks were thwarted. His circle included Djamal Beghal, a French Algerian who was encouraged to plan a suicide attack on the U.S. embassy in Paris; members of the Kurdistan-based militant group Ansar al-Islam, which later came under Zarqawi's leadership; and Abu Dahdah, a Syrian-born imam who has

the entire spectrum of political Islam," Crooke says. For example, although Abdel Aziz al-Rantissi, a Hamas leader killed in an Israeli air strike in April, stated publicly that "God declared war against America, Bush, and Sharon," an analysis of his religious ideology, which rejects worldwide *jihad*, suggests that the organization is not closely connected to global terror groups.

A Western analyst I spoke with in Saudi Arabia believes that the language of communiqués from the Arabian-peninsula branch of al-Qaeda indicates that this group is developing similar differences with bin Laden's philosophy. "It seems increasingly likely that al-Qaeda here is no longer being directed from a mountaintop in Waziristan," he said. Saudi groups draw most heavily on *taqfirism* and on crude homegrown anti-Shiism—a sectarian approach at



odds with bin Laden's famous call, in 1998, for a unified *jihadi* front.

Azzam Tamimi is a Palestinian who supports the goals but not all the tactics of Hamas and is ideologically opposed to al-Qaeda. A director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought, in London, he approaches forensic theology as something of an insider. Tamimi has examined almost every communiqué issued by al-Qaeda and hundreds of videos and audio tapes issued by other terrorist organizations. He has given lectures on the subject to MI5—Britain's domestic security service—and Scotland Yard.

When I met with Tamimi, in June, he had just been watching a video communiqué from Iraq. Three blindfolded Turkish hostages, who had been captured earlier that month, were kneeling while a masked militant read a statement announcing their imminent release. Only the essence of the message had been translated in the western media, but Tamimi had studied the statement in full. He was struck by the first few words of it, which referred to the "sons of Muhammad al-Fatih"—Muhammad the Conqueror, an Ottoman sultan who captured Constantinople from the Byzantines in 1453.

"It's a clever appeal to the Turkish people—linking the struggle in Iraq with the Turks' own medieval struggle against the Crusaders," Tamimi said. "I'm convinced that this kidnapper is a very well-educated man."

The media had reported that Zarqawi was responsible for the kidnappings, but Tamimi disagreed. He believed that the kidnappers belonged to a different group. "I can tell by their accent that they are Iraqis," he said. "Their form of Arabic gives another clue: it's very Koranic. It means these people are Islamists. They have spent a long time undergoing religious training." It is just such insights that can help those fighting terrorism to know their enemy—and to identify, in particular operations, just who that enemy is. ■

*Stephen Grey is a writer specializing in Middle Eastern issues and other foreign affairs. From 2001 to 2003 he was the head of the Insight investigation team of the Sunday Times of London.*

VERBATIM

## REBRANDING AMERICA

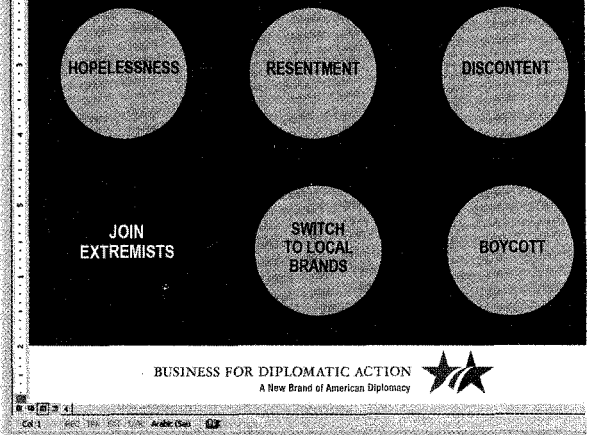
It's an American CEO's war-on-terror nightmare: for every would-be *jihadi* learning bomb-making in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, countless consumers around the globe start expressing their anti-Americanism by buying Mecca Cola instead of Coke, flipping on al-Jazeera instead of CNN, or zooming around in a battered Fiat instead of upgrading to a shiny Ford.

That's the scenario that a group called Business for Diplomatic Action—the creator of the faintly alarmist PowerPoint presentation reproduced above—wants to avert. Founded in January by the advertising mogul Keith Reinhard (whose firm created Budweiser's "Whasup?" campaign, among others), BDA hopes to marshal a cooperative effort among CEOs, academics, and advertisers to counter sliding foreign perceptions of "Brand America."

Thus far some of BDA's projects are strictly business-focused—roundtables and symposia for corporate leaders; an Internet-based virtual library of "best practices" for U.S. companies doing business overseas. But others are aimed at a general audience—including a passport-sized "World Citizens Guide" for young Americans traveling abroad (the guide, sponsored by Pepsi, debuts this fall) and *The Exchange*, a potential reality-TV series featuring the adventures of foreign interns in a multinational's U.S. offices and American interns working in its foreign offices. ("The CEO may then decide to hire one or more of them," BDA suggests, perhaps hoping that Donald Trump will be available for the role.)

All this may sound like a quixotic effort, but it's hard to imagine that the private sector can't manage to improve at least marginally on the U.S. government's recent record in public diplomacy. Shortly after 9/11 the State Department hired a celebrated ad executive, Charlotte Beers,

### The Feeling of Being "Left Behind"



to spearhead a campaign aimed at winning Muslim hearts and minds. A year and a half later she eased herself (or was eased, depending on whom you believe) out the door, after an ad campaign showcasing happy American Muslims met with a frosty reception in the Islamic world.

Keith Reinhard's second-in-command at BDA, Carl Eggspuehler, is an escapee from the wreckage of Beers's efforts, and she argues that the fault lay not with her former boss but with the government's "rigid and bureaucratic" institutional habits and its detachment from overseas realities. In many ways the private sector is actually better suited for gathering intelligence about global attitudes, Eggspuehler insists: "If I want information about the mood in a foreign country, I can get it literally within twenty-four hours, from companies with a presence on the ground." The business community is also better suited to exporting a message about America, since at this point, Eggspuehler says, "the federal government is just not a credible messenger."

Besides, what could be more quintessentially American than letting private enterprise have a go where the government has so abjectly failed? And even if BDA's efforts come to naught, at least the group will be working with every weapon in the American advertising arsenal. As Eggspuehler puts it, musing on the State Department's technological backwardness: "Our board and our advisers use their PalmPilots."

—ROSS DOUTHAT



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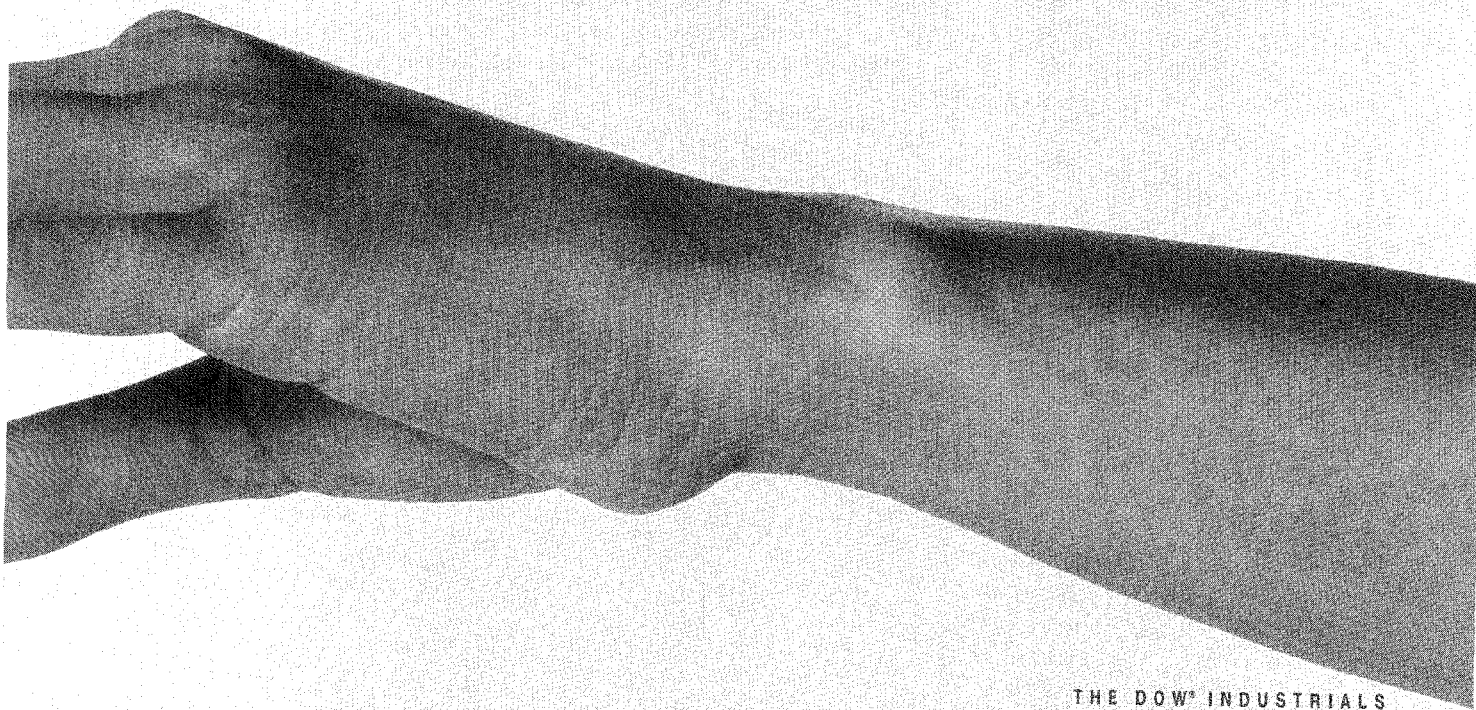
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## Supreme Irony

*As elections near, partisans always invoke a threat to the "balance" of the Court. But the real peril isn't ideology—it's blandness*

BY BENJAMIN WITTES

According to a *New York Times* editorial, George Bush says that if re-elected, he would "try to finish packing the [Supreme] Court against *Roe v. Wade*, the decision validating abortion rights, which four members say they want to strike down." If voters elect a Democratic President, the Republican candidate predicts, they "could lock in liberal judicial activism for the next generation," and "the social landscape could dramatically change." The televangelist Pat Robertson reminds the faithful that "five people can decide the destiny of unborn children [and] whether we can pray or not pray." But, he says, "it looks as if two or three of those unelected officials are getting ready to retire or go on up to that great court in the sky." The liberal columnist Anthony Lewis forecasts that a Republican victory will portend Supreme Court nominees who, like William Rehnquist, are "judicial ideologue[s] of the right."

Any of these warnings could have come out of yesterday's newspaper. But in fact none of them is recent. The *Times* was worried, back in 1992, about what would happen if the elder President Bush was re-elected. The Republican candidate fretting about liberal judicial activism was not George W. Bush but Bob Dole, in 1996. Robertson was predicting the death of justices (all of whom are alive and well) four years ago. And Lewis was writing about Ronald Reagan's ambition, way back in 1980, to nominate other justices like Rehnquist.

This year, once again, the fate of the courts is a base-rallying point for both parties. As of this writing the candidates themselves were largely avoiding the issue, but the rhetoric from interest groups supporting both Bush and Kerry comes straight from the old script: Vacancies are inevitable. The

balance of the Supreme Court is at stake. If you're a liberal, *Roe* is in grave peril and the right threatens a "roll-back" of everything you hold dear. If you're a conservative, the Court is on the verge of imposing an anti-religious social agenda on your family and community. Either way, justice in America is an out-of-control car speeding toward the edge of a cliff, and only a vote for [fill in your candidate here] can prevent it from plunging over the edge.

Yet this same car has been speeding toward this same cliff for decades, and it never actually seems to reach the edge. This election isn't likely to change



that. To be sure, diehards on both sides think Armageddon is already upon us: some conservatives see grave judicial usurpations in, for example, the Court's ban on the death penalty for the mentally retarded and its upholding of affirmative action; some liberals see *Bush v. Gore* and a few cases about the Eleventh Amendment as the modern equivalents of *Dred Scott*. (Quick quiz: What is the Eleventh Amendment?)

But the public isn't buying it. Polling data from Gallup show that Americans have long held the Court in higher regard than they do the executive branch or Congress. Since 1973, moreover, Gallup has asked how much confidence Americans have in a broad range of institutions, the Court included. Their answers have been remarkably stable over time: those expressing a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the Court have ranged from a high of 56 percent in the mid-1980s to a low of 39 percent in 1991. A recent poll, taken in May, showed 46 percent expressing strong confidence in the Court. If we include those who expressed "some" confidence, the figure jumps to 83 percent. Clearly, the public doesn't see the Supreme Court as out of step with where it ought to be, or on the verge of imposing values antithetical to those of mainstream America.

I suspect that these Americans have discerned a truth that activists and partisans on both sides of the aisle—along with many members of the press—fail to comprehend: The Supreme Court is not a radical institution, nor is it likely to become one as a result of any particular election. The stakes for the judiciary in presidential elections, including this one, are a lot lower than many people imagine.

This is not because no significant ideological or methodological differences divide judges. Differences do exist, and they track party affiliation to some extent. And they matter—not just on hot-button issues such as abortion

rights and affirmative action, but also in those run-of-the-mill cases (about which the public doesn't care) that actually guide the way lower courts handle huge swaths of law.

That said, the courts have pretty strong institutional defenses against radicalism of any kind. For one thing, the judiciary's power is spread among more than 800 federal judges, no one of whose views matter all that much in



the broad scheme of things. Even on the Supreme Court the idiosyncrasies or ideological extremism of any one justice can have only a limited effect. Without four like-minded comrades his or her views are just noise. For another thing, the confirmation process offers a check, particularly now that senators of both parties are so likely to oppose nominees with whose views they disagree. It's hard to imagine that either the conservative Antonin Scalia, who was unanimously confirmed as recently as 1986, or the Court's late liberal icon William Brennan could win confirmation today. The Senate, quite simply, is far more aggressive than it used to be in asserting its power to advise and consent on judicial nominees. Clarence Thomas, the only strongly ideological nominee confirmed since Robert Bork's rejection by the Senate, garnered confirmation in large measure by masking his views. Indeed, Presidents haven't proved particularly adept at assessing a judge's ideological leanings; justices from Byron White to David Souter have disappointed whichever party was responsible for their accession. Life tenure for judges was instituted to ensure their independence, and it does just that—particularly as the controversial issues of one era give way to those of the next, and justices find themselves facing issues undreamt of in their confirmation hearings.

Most important, the Court is more aware of and responsive to public opinion than many people imagine—although not in the crass sense that justices consult opinion polls before handing down decisions. The justices know that the political system has ways of reining in the Court. And when the Court has been wildly out of step with public opinion over any extended period of time, it has been the Court, not the public, that has eventually had to yield, if only by attrition. Franklin D. Roosevelt's infamous Court-packing plan failed, for example, but Roosevelt ultimately succeeded in filling the Court with justices who would uphold overwhelmingly popular New Deal programs. The genuinely unpopular excesses of the Warren Court in deferring to the rights of accused criminals

triggered the law-and-order-oriented presidential campaign of Richard Nixon in 1968. Following his election Nixon consciously sought to put people on the Court who would be (as he privately urged Rehnquist to be at the time of his nomination) "mean and rough."

Justice Scalia, fretting about free-wheeling methods of constitutional adjudication, once wrote, "If the courts are free to write the Constitution anew, they will, by God, write it the way the majority wants; the appointment and confirmation process will see to that." This observation may not be cause for quite the alarm it provokes in Scalia, but it is certainly accurate as a reflection of the Court's relationship to public opinion over time.

The mythology surrounding the Court holds that it is a counter-majoritarian institution—that is, that it acts as a check on the impulses of the more democratic branches of government. This is true—but only to a point. Michael Klarman, a professor of law at the University of Virginia, argued in a 1996 article that the Court generally functions less as a check on the majority will than as an agent of it. "Frequently the Court takes a strong national consensus and imposes it on relatively isolated outliers," Klarman wrote. "Infrequently the Court resolves a genuinely divisive issue that rends the nation in half; on these occasions, roughly half the country supports the Court's determination." Klarman contended that even in those areas where the Court's heroic posture departed most famously from popular opinion—race discrimination, freedom of speech, separation of Church and State, and criminal procedure—its changes were "congruent with and dependent upon the broad sweep of historical forces." He wrote, "The Court was not, in any strong sense, being countermajoritarian."

This tendency helps explain why the Court retains high approval ratings—and, for that matter, why abortion rights remain constitutionally protected despite a number of conservative appointments. (Abortion rights are, after all, favored by a solid majority of American voters.) Praise the tendency as political savvy or damn it as a failure

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## DOWN YEAR FOR DYNASTIES

**L**ong before George W. Bush followed his father into the White House, it was widely believed that one's name could be the key to public office. After all, American history is peppered with political dynasties, from the famous (Adams, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Gore) to the not-so-famous (Bayh, Dingell, Udall). This year has produced a bumper crop of political Mini-Mes: no fewer than eight sons and daughters of established politicians are running for office, largely—in some cases, it would seem, solely—on the strength of their names.

Tracking these political scions practically requires a scorecard. This year those who sought a congressional seat included Brad Smith (son of Michigan's Nick Smith), Ed Broyhill (son of North Carolina's Jim Broyhill), and Dan Boren (son of Oklahoma's former senator and governor David Boren), along with the Roman-numeral set of Connie Mack IV (son of Florida's Connie Mack III) and Billy Tauzin III (son of Louisiana's Billy Tauzin II). Running for governor is Matt Blunt (son of House Majority Whip Roy Blunt, of Missouri), and for the Senate, Lisa Murkowski (daughter of Alaska's Governor Frank Murkowski). It's doubtful that anyone running faces more family pressure than Russ Carnahan, who is seeking Dick Gephardt's seat in Missouri, because Carnahan is the child of two politicos: his late father, Mel, was the state's longtime governor, and his mother, Jean, was a U.S. senator.

The reason that political progeny are so plentiful is simple: a famous last name confers instant recognition among voters—and very often Mom's or Dad's network of donors, too. Political experts consider these components crucial, because of the ever increasing cost of campaigns. The right surname can even ward off potential competitors.

But the advantages seem to be diminishing. In the most recent election cycle Scott Armey (son of the former House majority leader Dick Armey) and Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (daughter of Robert F. Kennedy) were notable offspring who went down to defeat. And this year Bush isn't the only political scion who could be in trouble. Nearly everyone running for Congress or a gov-



ernorship is struggling—or has already lost—in his or her bid to follow in a parent's footsteps.

Smith and Broyhill both tanked in the primaries. Tauzin, Blunt, and Murkowski all face dogfights with their opponents in the general election. Carnahan edged past a crowded field with just 23 percent of the vote, and Mack narrowly won his primary too. Only Boren sailed to primary victory and looks to have a lock on a House seat.

Has the American political dynasty fallen victim to populist outrage? Probably not. Instead, the political analyst Stuart Rothenberg argues, many of the current legacy candidates simply aren't as good as their parents—but "strong candidates with really good names and really good credentials have done really well." Indeed, Boren was elected to the Oklahoma statehouse at age twenty-nine. But other legacies have less impressive credentials. Neither Smith nor Broyhill had any political experience. And Mack's résumé could politely be termed "nontraditional" for an aspiring congressman—even in Florida. He has a history of bar fights and has done marketing work for the restaurant chain Hooters.

Simply put, Rothenberg says, "the name doesn't guarantee victory." Occasionally, dynastic nepotism can even thwart it. Alaska is as Republican as they come, yet Murkowski's Senate race is one of the most competitive in the country—primarily because her father somewhat imperiously appointed her to succeed him when he left the Senate, and his poor favorability ratings threaten to drag her down.

Murkowski might even be wishing what would once have been unthinkable: that she had a different last name. —MARK MURRAY

of principle in the face of crass politics, but the Court's institutional conservatism has proved to be far more powerful in the long run than either ideology or partisan politics. And in the broad scheme of things it will most likely continue to guide the Court, whether the nominees who are confirmed in the coming years are George W. Bush's or John Kerry's.

**I**ronically, perhaps the gravest threat to the judiciary lies in the very "courts in peril" scare talk that both sides use. The result of such overheated rhetoric is that nobody with strong convictions of any sort—in other words, nobody likely to buck the majoritarian instincts and institutional caution of the Court—can get confirmed, so the Court becomes a bland institution of consensus moderation. Ronald Reagan couldn't get his conservative nominees, Bork and Douglas Ginsburg, confirmed, and had to settle instead for Anthony Kennedy, who has proved far mushier and more centrist. Bill Clinton didn't even try to appoint staunch liberals but, rather, named two lawyerly moderates, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer. George W. Bush's inability to get Miguel Estrada—who was reputed to be a conservative but had no history of public statements—onto a lower court suggests that even another stealth nominee like Thomas may now fail to get through. Realistically, the Senate's aggressive posture on judicial confirmations means that a President can nominate with confidence only someone who is demonstrably acceptable to the opposite party. The zeal of both sides to ensure that the Court is not dominated by either Scalia or Brennan creates the very real possibility that it will be composed of Kennedys and Sandra Day O'Connors. For those who recognize the contributions to the Court that have come from its margins (and those contributions are enormous), this should be of no small concern. But it's not the worry people will be shouting from the rooftops in the weeks before the election. ■

*Benjamin Wittes is an editorial writer specializing in legal affairs for The Washington Post and the author of Starr: A Reassessment (2002).*





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## Now, for Tonight's Assignment...

*There's a way to raise student achievement that's sensible, cheap, and ridiculously straightforward. It'll probably go nowhere*

BY JONATHAN RAUCH

Suppose I told you that I knew of an education reform guaranteed to raise the achievement levels of American students; that this reform would cost next to nothing and would require no political body's approval; and that it could be implemented overnight by anybody of a mind to undertake it. You would jump at it, right? But Americans haven't jumped at it. They rarely even talk about it.

In 1983 I began my reporting career covering education for a North Carolina newspaper. Then—as now—everyone talked about reforming schools, but I became convinced that one of the key ingredients of successful schooling was being mostly overlooked. Learning depends on what educators call “time on task,” which is what the rest of us call attending class and studying.

American schools are remarkably parsimonious with time. The school year is fixed at or below 180 days in all but a handful of states—down from more than 190 in the late nineteenth century, when Saturday-morning sessions were common. The instructional day is only about six hours, of which much is taken up with nonacademic matters. In 1994 a national commission calculated that in four years of high school a typical American student puts in less than half as much time on academic subjects as do students in Japan, France, and Germany.

Extending the school day or the school year can get expensive and complicated, and reducing nonacademic electives and gym brings hollers from parents and kids. But there is one quite cheap and uncomplicated way to increase study time: add more homework.

You may not be shocked to learn that homework raises student achievement, at least in the higher grades. For young children homework appears not to be particularly helpful. Even among older students it is hard to be sure of

the extent to which more homework causes higher achievement, because higher achievement also leads to more homework (brighter or harder-working kids will take more-demanding courses). Still, no one doubts that, as all kinds of studies have found, older kids learn more if they study more. Surveying the evidence in 2001, Harris Cooper, an educational psychologist, wrote, “For high school students the effect of homework can be impressive. Indeed, relative to other instructional techniques and the costs involved in doing it, homework can produce a substantial, positive effect on adolescents’ performance in school.”

You may also not be shocked to learn that, for the most part, American students don’t do much homework. Nowadays homework loads among the Ivy-bound superelite can be downright inhumane, but they are the exception. In 1999, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, two thirds of seventeen-year-olds did less than an hour of homework on a typical night (in other words, only about ten minutes per subject). Forty percent did no homework at all—up from 34 percent in 1984. In 1995 the Third International Mathematics and Science Survey asked high school seniors (or their equivalents) in twenty countries about study time. “Of twenty nations,” says a recent report by the Brookings Institution’s Brown Center on Education Policy, “the U.S. ranked near the bottom, tied for the next-to-last position.”

I asked Tom Loveless, the director of the Brown Center, what might happen to achievement if students did more homework. “Let’s say we took the forty percent who do no homework and they suddenly did an hour a night,” he replied. “I think it would go up a lot. That’s a hundred and eighty more hours of schoolwork”—assuming these

kids studied only on school nights. For a reality check I called Raymond J. Pasi, the principal of Yorktown High School, in Arlington, Virginia, not far from where I live. He and his guidance counselors estimate that 25 to 30 percent of their students do no homework. “I believe if the average student spent twenty more minutes on homework—and by homework I would even include reviewing the day’s notes—you’d see an increase in achievement of that student,” Pasi told me.

It seems peculiar that in a country that chatters obsessively about its educational shortcomings, the word “homework” goes all but unspoken. In vain have I waited for governors and Presidents to give speeches about homework, for states to audit and emphasize homework, for programs to identify and assist and prod students who don’t study.

Why the silence? Perhaps because no one stands to earn billions of dollars on homework; perhaps because people resent politicians’ and schools’ intrusions into home life. I suspect that the biggest reason, however, is reluctance to use or even hint at the L-word in reference to American kids.

The country’s schools certainly need plenty of fixing. But it is also the case that many American students are lazy (there, I said it!). Just ask them. In 2001, 71 percent of high school and middle school students agreed with the proposition that most students in their school “[did] the bare minimum to get by.” A minority described themselves as “trying [their] best to do well in school,” and 56 percent said they “could try a little harder.”

Americans like to view their children as passive recipients of education—as products of the schools. If the product is defective, fix the factory. You will know that Americans are finally serious about education reform when they begin to talk not just about how the schools are failing our children but also about how our children are failing their schools. ■

*Jonathan Rauch is a correspondent for The Atlantic and a resident writer at the Brookings Institution. His most recent book, Gay Marriage: Why It Is Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America (2004), was excerpted in the April Atlantic.*





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# A \$2.4 Trillion Figure of Speech

*The federal budget—an explanation*

BY P. J. O'ROURKE

**T**he budget I am proposing for 2005 is a reflection of this nation's goals and purpose," President Bush has said. This is a worrisome statement. For one thing, the federal budget has a projected deficit of \$367 billion or more. For another thing, the federal budget doesn't exist. Congress failed to pass it. And fiscal year 2005 began on October 1. Did Mom's Social Security check bounce? Have American soldiers been reduced to throwing stones at Iraqi insurgents? Are people with toe-nail clippers in their pockets walking straight onto commercial airliners?

I called the office of my congressman (Charles Bass, R-NH). I spoke to a legislative assistant (who chooses to remain nameless). It turns out that the federal budget is, the LA told me, something called a "concurrent resolution" that "doesn't become law" even when approved by lawmakers. Spending bills, you'll be relieved to know, are proceeding apace using last year's budget provisions and various parliamentary dodges.

Budgets weren't passed for FY 1999 and FY 2003 either, and no one much noticed. There wasn't a comprehensive federal budget at all until the Budget and Accounting Act of 1921, when President Warren G. Harding attempted to impose upon government the sound practices of business. (Write your own footnote below, citing Teapot Dome.) And the budget had no enforcement mechanism until the Congressional Budget Act of 1974.

"There are so many loopholes," the LA said. "One of the easiest ways to get around budget spending limits is 'emergency' spending. The definition of what constitutes an emergency is very vague."

Thus the federal budget is similar to the figures that many a young person has scribbled on the back of a first pay envelope—

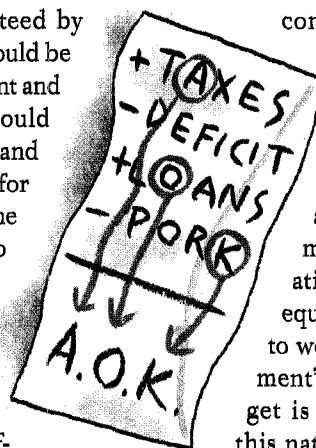
|                     |          |
|---------------------|----------|
| net salary per year | \$22,380 |
| rent per mo.        | \$1,900  |
|                     | uh-oh    |

—the scribbles having little effect on that evening's emergency spending in bars.

However, we should get it out of our heads that a government budget is a kind of overgrown household budget. The government cannot move to someplace cheaper, such as Quito, Ecuador, or get a better job. (Pleasant as it is, sometimes, to imagine these things.)

The budget doesn't have much control over the government. Then again, the government doesn't have much control over the budget. About two thirds of the approximately \$2.4 trillion federal budget is mandatory spending—Social Security, Medicare, and other payments guaranteed by law. Of course, the laws could be changed. And the President and everyone in Congress could start phoning law offices and lobbying firms looking for work. Of the remaining one third, almost half goes to defense and homeland security. Cutting these at the moment would be a way to become Dennis Kucinich. This leaves an amount not very different from the amount of the deficit for everything else. It will be a brave politician who announces that all the roads and post offices have been eliminated in order to balance the budget.

It's understandably hard to keep the government from spending money. What's less understood is that it's hard to keep the government from getting money to spend. Cutting tax revenues does not cut spending, as the Bush tax cuts have proved. The government can borrow. When the government runs out of lenders, it can do something that households are forbidden to do:



print money. The goods and services provided by government will be paid for somehow, with taxes, debt, inflation. The wonder is not that the budget isn't balanced. The wonder is that "balanced budget" is a concept.

Yet it's a politically powerful concept, and has been since the founding of the Republic. Jeffersonian Democrats used balancing the budget as an argument to keep the federal government small. Post-Civil War Republicans used balancing the budget as an excuse to spend revenues from high tariffs and make the federal government large. Party positions have since reversed, but tactics continue in similarity. The FY 2005 budget stalled when "deficit hawk" Republicans joined "fiscally responsible" Democrats in an attempt to impose budget rules requiring that new spending be offset by outlay cuts or revenue increases. Republicans saw this budget-balancing, one of them told me, as a means of "keeping the size of the government down." Democrats saw it as a means of embarrassing the Republicans.

The budget is political noise and confusion. The attempt to balance the budget creates additional pandemonium. We become distracted from watching what the government actually does. We become muddled in our considerations of whether the value equals the cost. And we begin to worry that from the government's point of view, the budget is indeed "a reflection of this nation's goals and purpose."

According to the Congressional Research Service, "Budgeting for the federal government is an enormously complex process. It entails dozens of subprocesses, countless rules and procedures, the efforts of tens of thousands of staff persons ... [and] millions of work hours each year."

"But the day after the vote," said the legislative assistant in Congressman Bass's office, "you really don't think or hear about the budget until the next year." ■

*P. J. O'Rourke is a correspondent for The Atlantic. His most recent book is Peace Kills (2004).*



**Dear Ketel One Drinker**  
**Enjoy your holiday spirit.**



# Primary Sources

*Why married men earn more money; why "Dave" is sexier than "Paul"; the coming real-estate crash; does the Times best-seller list matter?*

## SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY ET, Phone Earth

The first close encounter may be closer than you think—if by “close encounter” you mean a radio encounter over light-years of interstellar space. According to calculations by Seth Shostak, the chief astronomer at the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) Institute, if there is intelligent life elsewhere in our galaxy, advances in computer processing power and telescope technology will enable us to detect its transmissions within the next two decades. Shostak’s projection relies on the admittedly speculative estimate that—based on the number of stars in the Milky Way, the number of stars likely to have planets, and the number of planets likely to have life—10,000 to one million alien radio transmitters may be broadcasting from within our galaxy. (Other opinion, he allows, “avers that *no* other contemporary, sentient galactic societies exist.”) Shostak assumes, as do many other scientists, that computer processing power will continue to double every eighteen months for the next ten years (it has reliably done so for four decades in a row), and then double only every thirty-six months in the following decade. These increases will allow for ever faster canvassing of the galaxy, and for reception of alien signals somewhere between 2014 and 2027. Of course, the transmitting civiliza-

tions will be 200 to 1,000 light-years away, and sending a reply will take centuries. All the more reason to start thinking about what we’re going to say.

—“When Will We Detect the Extraterrestrials?” Seth Shostak, SETI Institute

## SOCIETY

### The Wages of Marriage

Getting married has long been thought to be an excellent career move for men, who tend to earn considerably more when hitched than when single. The question, of course, is whether the higher salaries are actually *caused* by marriage or merely reflect a correlation between the qualities that make a good mate and those that make a good employee. A partial answer is provided by two economists who took a sample of married and unmarried men, controlled for education level and age, and found that the married men earned 20 percent more than the single ones. Then the economists looked at identical twins (thereby controlling for factors such as upbringing, physical attractiveness, mental capability, and so on) and found an even more pronounced marriage effect: the married twins earned 27 percent more than their unmarried brothers. The authors cite what they call the “popular explanations” for this marriage premium—employers are biased toward married men, and marriage allows men to spend less time on domestic chores

and more time in the office—and then offer one of their own. “Because the income of married men affects the well-being of their spouse and children,” they write, married men are likely to “work harder and more assertively seek out raises and better job opportunities.”

—“Are All the Good Men Married? Uncovering the Sources of the Marital Wage Premium,” Kate Antonovics (UC–San Diego) and Robert Town (University of Minnesota)

### What’s in a Name?

If you feel that the opposite sex isn’t giving you the attention you so richly deserve, maybe you should consider making a change—a name change, that is. According to a preliminary study by an MIT cognitive scientist, the vowel sounds in people’s names may have an impact on how oth-

ers judge their attractiveness. Specifically, when the men in the study were assigned names with a stressed front vowel (a vowel sound spoken at the front of the mouth), they were rated as more attractive than when they were assigned names with a stressed back vowel. (In other words, good news for Dave, Craig, Ben, Jake, Rick, Steve, Matt; bad news for Lou, Paul, Luke, Tom, Charles, George, John.) In women the effect was reversed, and a stressed back vowel (Laura, Julie, Robin, Susan, Holly) boosted sex appeal, whereas a stressed front vowel (Melanie, Jamie, Jill, Tracy, Ann, Liz, Amy) had the opposite effect—to the author’s disappointment, no doubt.

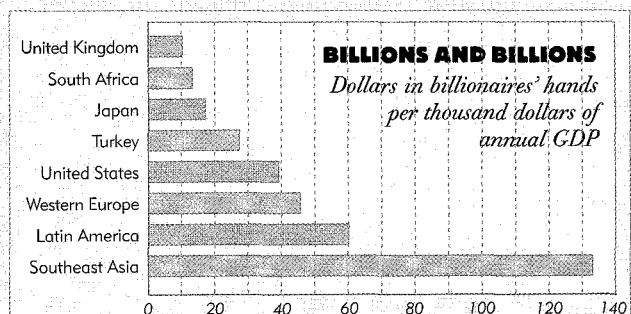
—“What’s in a Name? The Effect of Sound Symbolism on Perception of Facial Attractiveness,” Amy Perfors, MIT

## FOREIGN AFFAIRS

### All in the Family

Family-owned companies are bad for business, a new study argues—at least when they dominate a large chunk of a country’s economy. Outside the United States and the United Kingdom, most major corporations are in the hands of a few wealthy families, rather than being owned by a wide network of shareholders. The power of these small families often extends far beyond the companies they own directly, thanks to a system of “control pyramids” in which they exercise indirect control over a slew of smaller companies. This concentration of corporate power doesn’t merely leave a high percentage of wealth in the hands of billionaires (see chart)—it also retards growth, diminishes efficiency, and limits economic freedom. Moreover, “a tiny elite that cannot be sacked,” as the study puts it, is likely to pursue “economic entrenchment,” in which property rights and financial openness are curbed to protect a few families’ economic and political prerogatives.

—“Corporate Governance, Economic Entrenchment and Growth,” Randall Morck, Daniel Wolfenzon, and Bernard Yeung, NBER



## Misery in a Kilt

In a study called "The Scots May Be Brave but They Are Neither Happy nor Healthy" the authors report that—well, the title more or less tells the story. Despite rising economic fortune, self-reported well-being is lower in Scotland than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Scots suffer from higher rates of depression than other residents of the UK, and from high rates of suicide and accidental death. This last is probably influenced by the amount of alcohol consumed in Scotland—which also has some relationship to the Scots' relative unhealthiness, manifested in rates of obesity, multiple sclerosis, asthma, and diabetes that are higher than elsewhere in Great Britain or in Europe as a whole. With all this to cope with, it's no wonder that middle-aged Scots have, on average, blood-pressure readings among the highest in the Western world.

—"The Scots May Be Brave but They Are Neither Healthy nor Happy," David Bell (University of Stirling) and David G. Blanchflower (Dartmouth)

## CULTURE

### The Tom Clancy Effect?

It's the holy grail of authors. Its tabulations are shrouded in mystery. Its lucky fifteen are regularly stacked in front at bookstores. But does the *New York Times* best-seller list increase sales as well as reflect them? According to an analysis of the *Times* hardcover fiction titles conducted by a professor at Stanford Business School, the answer is yes—but primarily for authors making their first appearance on the list. It's true that *Times* best sellers sell much better than other books: in the twenty-six-week sample taken, the 205 titles

| THE BRANDING OF THE PRESIDENT                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |           |                |              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|----------------|--------------|
| Based on research done jointly by the branding firm Landor Associates and the polling firm Penn, Schoen & Berland, this chart shows some of the brands that likely Bush supporters, Kerry supporters, and undecided voters associate with the candidates. |           |                |              |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |           | GEORGE W. BUSH | JOHN KERRY   |
| Bush Supporters                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Coffee    | Folgers        | Starbucks    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Car       | Ford           | BMW          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Fast Food | Subway         | McDonald's   |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Beer      | Bud Light      | Heineken     |
| Kerry Supporters                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Coffee    | Dunkin' Donuts | Starbucks    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Car       | Ford           | Ford         |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Fast Food | McDonald's     | Subway       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Beer      | Bud Light      | Samuel Adams |
| Undecided Voters                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Coffee    | Dunkin' Donuts | Starbucks    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Car       | Ford           | BMW          |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Fast Food | McDonald's     | Subway       |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Beer      | Bud Light      | Heineken     |

that had appeared on the *Times* list accounted for 84 percent of all books sold. But the study uses raw sales data from various sources to argue that the *Times* list regularly makes mistakes in its picks—in 2001 and 2002, 109 works of hardcover fiction that should have made the list never cracked the *Times*'s top fifteen—and then compares the sales of books that should have been listed but weren't to those of books that *did* make the list. It turns out that although having a book appear on the *Times* list for the first time can boost an author's sales by as much as 57 percent, the list's significance drops off sharply once an author has become well established. (For the John Grishams and Danielle Steels of the world, an appearance in the *Times* top fifteen has no discernible impact on sales.) As for the claim that best-seller lists create a herd mentality that crowds out other titles, the study finds that in fact the opposite may be true: a book's appearance on the list actually tends to

boost sales for other books in the same genre.

—"Bestseller Lists and Product Variety: The Case of Book Sales," Alan T. Sorensen, Stanford University

## THE NATION

### Bubble, Bubble

Considering refinancing your house? Maybe you ought to think twice. According to two economists at Goldman Sachs, the oft-rumored housing bubble is real—and it's global. Goldman's research looks in depth at housing prices in the United States, the UK, and Australia, and estimates that prices are, respectively, 10, 15, and 29 percent higher than they ought to be based on market fundamentals. In America prices headed upward in the mid-1990s—with good reason, because housing was undervalued in the middle of the decade. Lower mortgage rates were the main driver, with each percentage-point decrease in interest rates producing about a five percent increase in housing value. When the bubble pops, the result will most likely hurt homeowners and help renters, since rents

usually fall in a softer housing market.

—"House Prices: A Threat to Global Recovery or Part of the Necessary Rebalancing?" Mike Buchanan and Themistoklis Fiatakis, Goldman Sachs

## Under the Sprintfluence

Driving while talking on a cell phone can be more dangerous than driving drunk. A recent study ran a driving simulation comparing the response time of drivers conducting cell-phone conversations and drivers who were legally intoxicated (they drank "a mixture of orange juice and vodka"—in more technical language, a screwdriver). Although the intoxicated drivers tended to follow other cars more closely and brake more violently, the drivers conversing on cell phones exhibited a greater delay in their response to events on the road, and were more likely to be involved in a collision. (Interestingly, it made no difference whether the cell-phone drivers were using handheld or hands-free equipment.) The intoxicated drivers actually drove more slowly, and had a better braking response, than the study's control group (participants who were neither drunk nor talking on a cell phone). But before you toss away your phone and reach for another shot of tequila, it's worth noting that the screwdriver-drinking participants had a blood-alcohol level of only .08—drunk, but not that drunk.

—"A Comparison of the Cell Phone Driver and the Drunk Driver," D. Strayer, F. Drews, and D. Crouch, AEI-Brookings Joint Center for Regulatory Studies

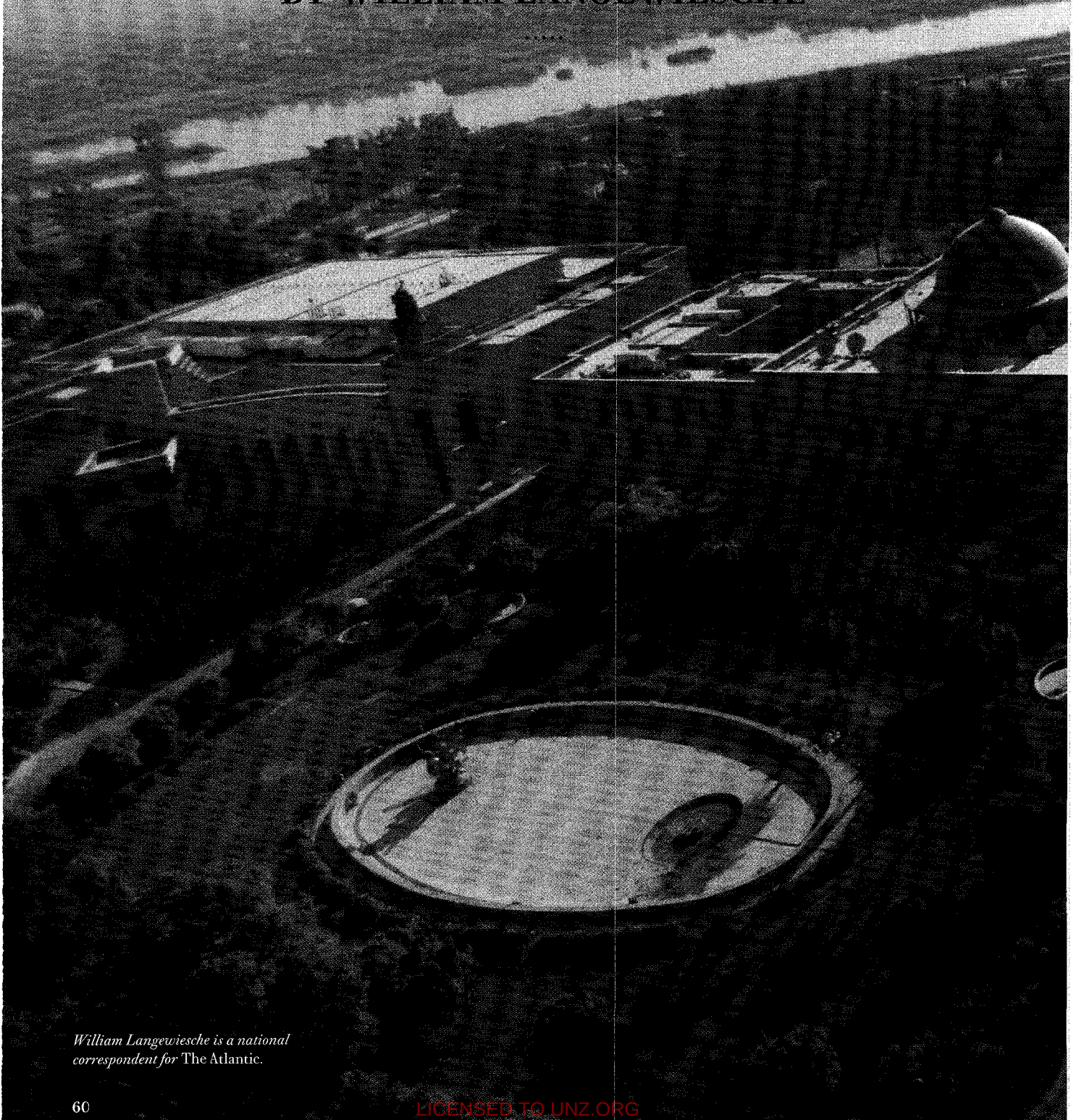
For links to the reports and documents discussed in these pages visit [www.theatlantic.com/doc/200411/primarysources](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200411/primarysources)



# WELCOME TO THE GREEN ZONE

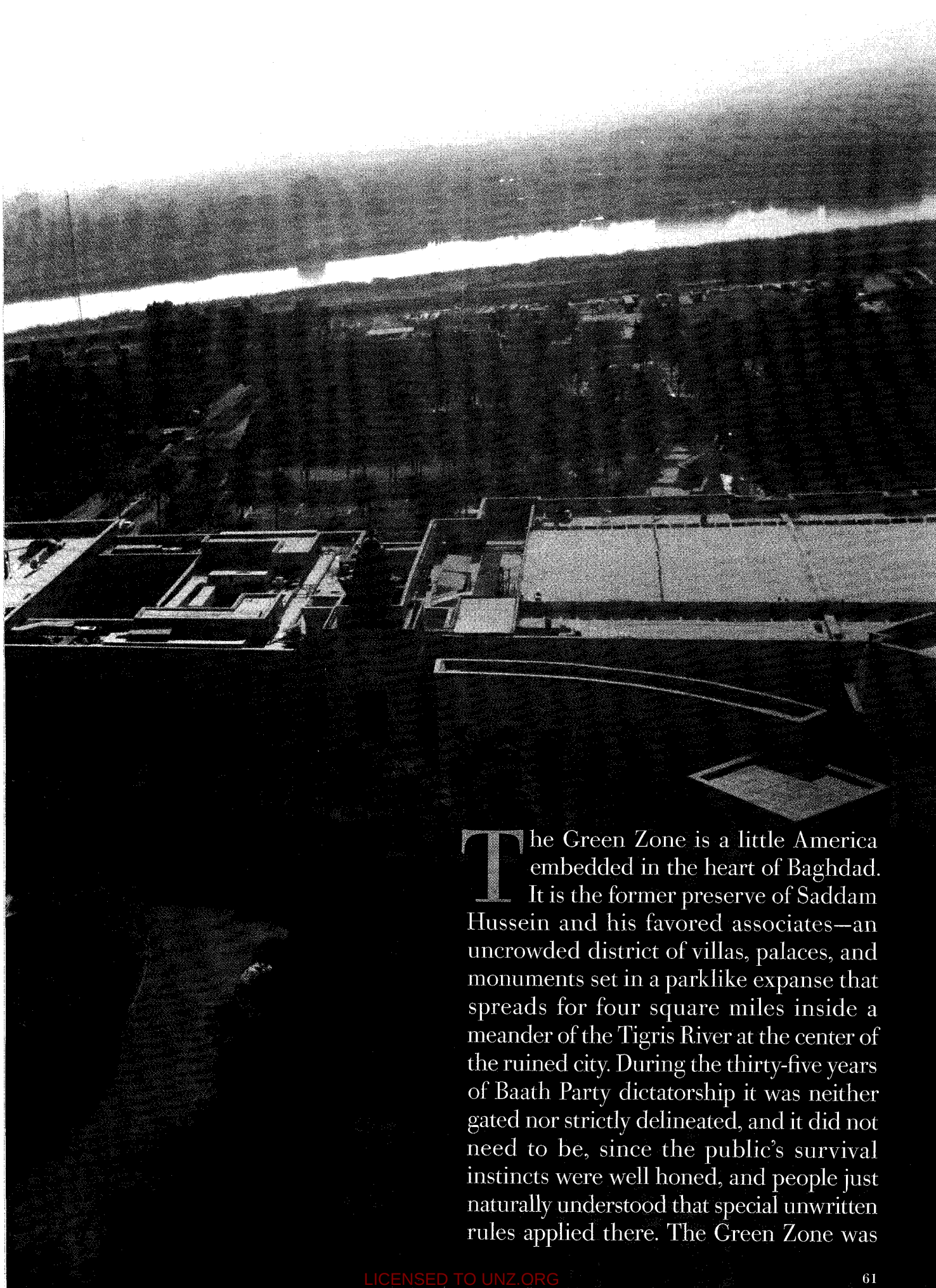
*The American Bubble in Baghdad*

BY WILLIAM LANGEWIESCHE



*William Langewiesche is a national  
correspondent for The Atlantic.*





**T**he Green Zone is a little America embedded in the heart of Baghdad. It is the former preserve of Saddam Hussein and his favored associates—an uncrowded district of villas, palaces, and monuments set in a parklike expanse that spreads for four square miles inside a meander of the Tigris River at the center of the ruined city. During the thirty-five years of Baath Party dictatorship it was neither gated nor strictly delineated, and it did not need to be, since the public's survival instincts were well honed, and people just naturally understood that special unwritten rules applied there. The Green Zone was



the seat of Saddam's power. You could cross it along the three or four grand boulevards that were open to traffic, and you could reflect on the glory of the regime, but you could not safely linger or gawk. If you had a car and happened to blow a tire, you kept driving on the rims, and made a good show of it too. I know of one young man, the son of a high official in the former regime, who made a U-turn there, and was arrested for the indiscretion; he was held and questioned until his father intervened, and explained that he was innocent and just a bit feckless. Ah, youth.

Since then much has changed. In April of 2003, as the U.S. Army's Third Infantry Division fought its way into the Green Zone with heavy loss of Iraqi life, the once privileged residents fled in haste, emptying compounds and palaces—and indeed an entire district—that therefore seemed ready-made for American use. Later it became obvious that the decision to install the occupation government in the center of the city and to base it in the very same buildings that had been used by the recent dictatorship was a serious blunder—one of several such blunders rooted in the arrogance of Yankee know-how, and in the strange failure to anticipate the end of the honeymoon, and the hostility that even enlightened invaders would soon elicit. At the time, however, basing in the Green Zone seemed like an act of engagement with the Iraqi people, and though the boulevards were now blocked, snarling traffic on the outside

**The contrast with the chaos of Baghdad can be disorienting. After undergoing two body searches and identity checks you find yourself suddenly among green lawns, where office workers chat about NFL football or some sitcom they saw on television.**

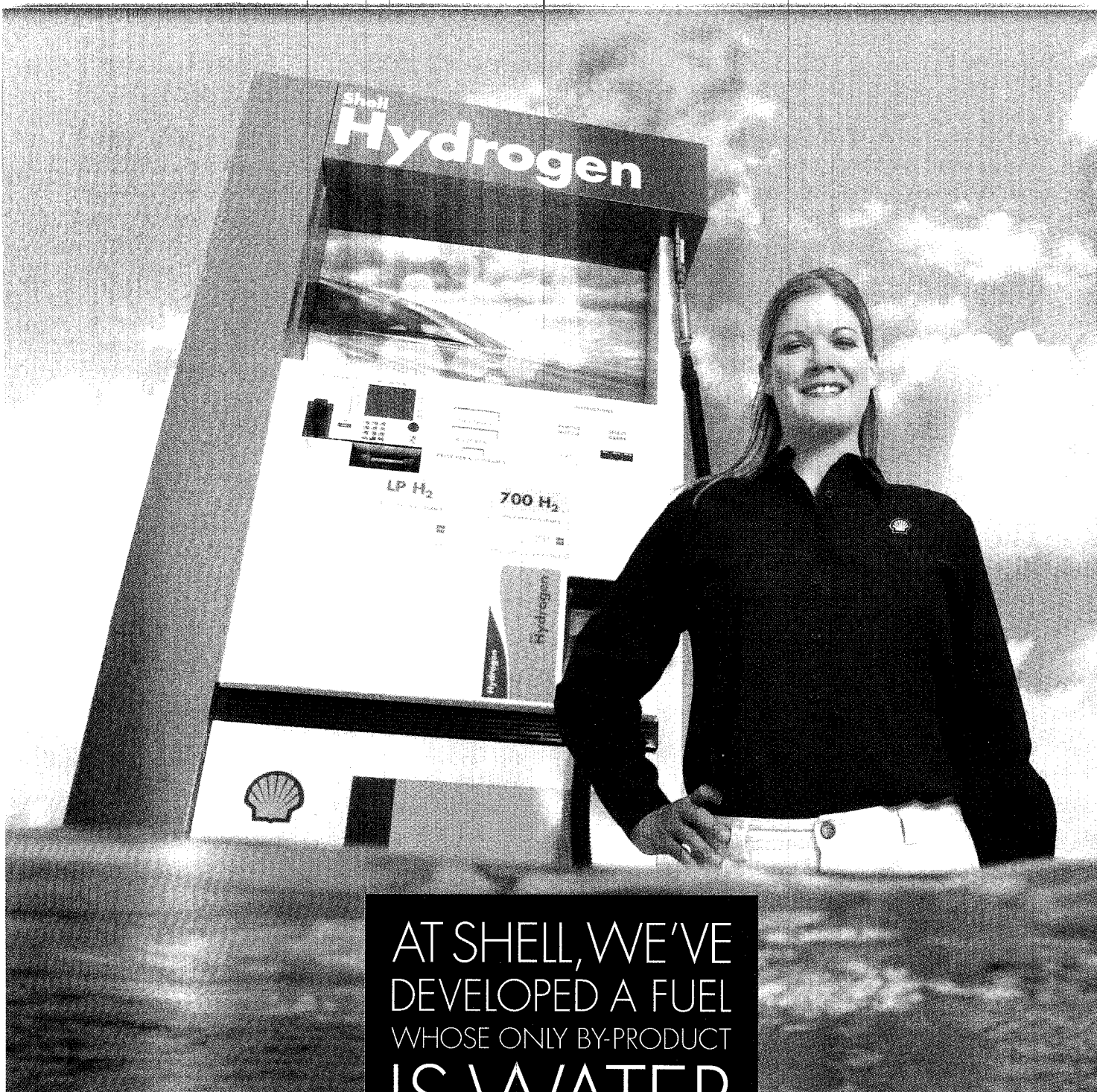
and forcing Iraqis who wished to enter to wait in exposed lines at the gates for body searches and identity checks, this was seen as a temporary expediency that surely the natives would understand: Baghdad was not quite yet secure, but soon it would be, as democracy and capitalism took hold. Moreover, life inside the zone was thought to be nearly as hard as life on the outside. It was dusty and uncomfortable, with inadequate electricity and air-conditioning, and little alcohol available at first beyond the stocks that Saddam's son Uday had collected. The grounds were scattered with shell casings and occasional live rounds. Some of the buildings had been bombed or pierced by Tomahawk cruise missiles, and all were littered with detritus and rubble. A cleanup was under way, but much remained to be done. The Republican Palace, which served as the center of operations,

was crammed with American and allied officials sleeping on cots, working furiously, and making do as best they could without an adequate computer network. Fifty-four of the Iraqi dead were buried under a dirt parking lot across the way, but that, too, was a temporary thing. The fleets of shiny new SUVs parked on top of them were much in use, sailing forth daily to offices and reconstruction projects throughout the city and the nation that lay beyond it. Coalition soldiers were somehow not quite able to bring the fighting to an end, but it was an optimistic time nonetheless.

What happened next seems to have been inevitable, and not a function of who was on top in distant America—the variations of Republicans or Democrats—so much as an organic effect of forcing two radically different peoples to live so close together, cheek by jowl in Baghdad. On the outside were the Arab Iraqis, who after decades of totalitarian rule were overwhelmingly insecure, distrustful, and opportunistic. On the inside were the Americans, who if anything were too secure—spoiled by wealth and national power, self-convinced, and softened by the promise and possibility of safe lives. These were not soldiers primarily, but they answered to the Pentagon, and had no choice politically but to borrow its concept of “force protection” and to make it their highest ideal. Consequently, with every pinprick of Iraqi resistance—with every killing of a collaborator, and every wildly aimed rocket or mortar round that arched in from the city and exploded harmlessly in the Green Zone's interior—controls at the gates grew stricter, and the boundary hardened into a heavily guarded perimeter of high concrete blast walls, about eight miles around. The reaction was noticed by the Iraqi insurgents, who had plenty of experienced *mujahideen* to explain the dynamics to them and to encourage further attacks, even with no grand plan in mind. Little popular support was necessary for such attacks, though popular support was growing. Slowly the American engagement diminished, and with it the effectiveness of American initiatives. The Americans knew it, too. Even within the Green Zone they derided their home as “The Bubble.” But they could not stop themselves from their retreat to its insides. Much has been made of the lack of planning that preceded the invasion, but it was this isolation afterward that turned out to be as great a problem. It is a famous paradox that walls that protect you also hem you in.

Inside those walls, in Baghdad, is a place that physically resembles nowhere in the United States. In one district along the Tigris private villas nestle in the shade of a luxuriant oasis. It is a perfectly Middle Eastern paradise, a fantasy of gardens and ponds, where footpaths cross ornamental bridges over artificial streams. A few villas have been reclaimed by their original Iraqi owners, exiles who have returned, but most of the properties have been expropriated by fast-moving American agencies and contractors—clear winners in the scramble for Green Zone quarters that





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followed Baghdad's fall. In every war there are people who manage to live well. Sitting in the villa district over drinks and cigars on a balmy evening, you might almost forget where you are. But of course you don't. The villa district is small, and the sounds of explosions intrude.

Elsewhere in the Green Zone live squatters of a different kind. They are the Baghdad poor who, long accustomed to survival on the streets, took advantage of the confusion of Saddam's defeat to scurry into a less leafy residential area that just hours before had been abandoned by the Baath Party elite. The first of them were true urban pioneers. In the midst of falling bombs and bursting shells, they staked their claims on empty houses, and very quickly called in family and friends. Since they were neither combatants nor allies of the old regime, the Americans could not decide how to get them out, and later gave up even trying. No one

**The romanticism of the Green Zone is visible in people's dress. Many civilians go around in safari vests and bush hats. Many also carry guns (some in quick-draw holsters), though there is no obvious reason other than style.**

knows how many of these Iraqis live in the Green Zone now, though estimates range around 5,000. They live a dozen or two in houses made for five, and through poverty and crowding have turned their district into the Green Zone's slum. Some of the men do manual labor, or sell soft drinks and trinkets from streetside stands, and all have learned to pass through the Green Zone's gates by staying abreast of the ever changing requirements. They are the source of concern about enemies on the inside, but the children are appealing, and the adults are quiet and unobtrusive, and so a cautious coexistence prevails.

The truth is that inside the Green Zone there is so much open space that the two groups can live with very little interaction. Much of the Green Zone is quite simply empty, and many of its areas that are built up are merely monumental. The monuments tend to be dull, and military in nature. The best known of them is the double set of gargantuan crossed swords that enhance the martial splendor of a parade ground where Saddam would review his troops from an outdoor air-conditioned stand. The crossed swords have become a tourist attraction, a backdrop for endless snapshots. Other, more utilitarian structures stand widely scattered across the landscape of dirt, grass, and trees: they are grandly modernistic government buildings—the National Assembly, the Council of Ministers, the Baath Party headquarters, and perhaps a dozen others—that once constituted the boasts of

the totalitarian regime. Though some remain usable, most are now hollow shells of bomb-busted concrete.

Loosely situated along the river, in the privacy of their grounds, stand more-personal boasts—the palaces of Saddam and his sons, a whole string of them, each much smaller than Versailles, but in the context of Iraq's suffering nearly equal in their conceit. If it is possible to judge the depravity of a regime by its taste, then killing this one was as necessary as killing the court of Louis XVI. (With the difference that the French, to their everlasting credit, did the job themselves.) Suffice it to say that Saddam's son Uday had one big palace mostly just for sex, and another one down the street, where he kept his collection of lions. The animals remained there, fed by American soldiers, until they were moved last summer to the zoo. Saddam's Green Zone residence was a little farther downriver, and is not to be confused with the massive 258-room Republican Palace, which was his workplace, and is currently the headquarters of the American occupation.

The number of Westerners living in the Green Zone varies from day to day, and has never been known precisely, but it, too, seems to be about 5,000. They are overwhelmingly American, of course. They live in large sandbagged compounds of prefabricated, factory-furnished housing modules, which are actually modified shipping containers, generally known as "trailers." They eat standard American food, almost all of it brought in from abroad and dished out in large and efficient feeding halls, scattered about. Partly in consequence of the food, they have an elaborate gym. They also have satellite TV, computers, DVDs, and telephones with U.S. area codes, which function as if they were in New York or Virginia, and thus require people to make long-distance overseas calls even to the city just next door.

The cost of all this is quite amazing: the numbers are uncertain, but on the basis of accounting agreements apparently being worked out among agencies of the federal government, overhead alone amounts to at least \$300,000 per person per year. That figure, which appears to be a bare minimum, includes only room, board, and office facilities, and excludes salaries, leaves, and travel, and also the expense to the military of providing protection.

Be that as it may, at the core of the Green Zone's population are about 2,000 government officials, most now technically working for the Department of State, but with an understanding that the White House itself is directly involved. There is an international component, primarily from Britain and Australia, but also from several other countries allied in Iraq with the United States, including Japan, Poland, and the Netherlands, to name a few. These officials are surrounded by an even larger number of civilian contractors—camp followers who work for big companies like Bechtel and Kellogg Brown & Root. The contractors provide logistical services to the Green Zone (including the risky one, of supply), attempt to run construction projects in the field, and generally suck up the fortune in American funds



that is being dispensed. Several hundred soldiers live there as well—most of them long-suffering reservists whose job is to defend the perimeter with their armor and guns, and whose biggest challenge, as so often in war, is to deal with the tedium of time. The other soldiers in Iraq—most of the ones out in the fight—do not live in the Green Zone, or even stop by. The Green Zone is essentially therefore a civilian place, though militarized, and with enemies all around.

Inside the zone the turnover rate is high: most people stay only a few months before moving on. The occupation has thus been characterized by a lack of institutional memory and expertise. Moreover, though there are some specialists involved, and a few non-native Arabic speakers, for ordinary officials no knowledge of the region is required. Indeed, the standard qualification for hiring on seems to amount to nothing more than a liberal arts college degree, and perhaps a political or bureaucratic connection. The officials make good money nonetheless: in addition to their federal salaries, they receive a 25 percent bonus for being in a foreign country and another 25 percent for hardship. Many also receive shovelfuls of overtime pay. As a result, even the lowest workers pull down the equivalent of six-figure annual salaries. Some work extremely hard. Almost all find living there exciting.

The culture that has resulted has been intensified by isolation. It is fundamentally American, like an outgrowth of Washington, D.C.—largely bureaucratic, somewhat political, and formed by the mingling of small-town soldiers, blue-collar workers, and legions of young buttoned-down Northeast Corridor types. But it contains romantic elements of foreign adventure as well—of colonial plantations and compound life, of military posts throughout the world, and of the war that swirls just outside the gates. The romanticism is visible in people's dress: many wear combat boots, though they could get by in street shoes or sandals, and they go around in variations of "travel" wear—convertible cargo pants, safari vests, and no small number of bush hats. Many also carry guns (some in quick-draw holsters), though there is no obvious reason other than style, since the security is tight, and the Green Zone has proved to be safer than many American towns.

For someone entering from the chaos of the city, the overall effect can be disorienting the first time: after standing in a long, tense line and undergoing two body searches and identity checks, you pass through the pedestrian gate and find yourself suddenly among green lawns, where office workers in combat boots stroll to lunch or simply wait at one of the shaded bus stops, chatting about NFL football, a General Motors recall, or some sitcom they saw on television last night. When the bus arrives, it is driven by an aging, affable Texan, and he's got Alanis Morissette wailing psychobabble on Armed Forces Radio, with the air-conditioning cranked up really high. America takes a while to get used to after time spent on the outside.

And then comes the driving. Traffic in the Green Zone is not merely light but numbingly slow and polite. Some drivers accelerate defiantly to cross the speed bumps made of flattened tank treads by the Republican Palace, and others sometimes ignore STOP signs on empty streets—but that is about the extent of any rebelliousness. The speed limit on the wide, dormant boulevards is 35 miles an hour, and it is respected. Most drivers are American, and they drive gently as Americans do, relaxing at the wheels of their SUVs, coasting, barely toeing their accelerators. They have nowhere to go anyway—maybe to the dry cleaners in a former palace of Uday's, or to one of the several bars or restaurants that have opened up, or to an outlying office over at the convention center in the far north side of the zone, where the press is kept at bay. When two SUVs cross paths, the biggest danger is the simultaneous impulse of each driver to let the other proceed. The contrast to driving in Baghdad could not be greater. Indeed, the orderliness of the streets inside the walls makes the streets on the outside seem all the more foreign and far away. With that distance comes room for imagination and a sort of infectious dread: you can feel it growing after merely a day. But since the only foreigners allowed to live inside the Green Zone are government employees and their contractors, eventually you do leave, plunging back into the dangerous, anarchic streets—and usually, unexpectedly, with a sense of relief.

Driving in Baghdad, like living there now, is a blood sport. It wasn't always so. Under Baathist rule the city was tightly bound by law and the police, and it was if anything too quiet and orderly. People were allowed to smoke in cafés, and to drive without seat belts, so it wasn't quite as petty as, say, San Francisco or New York. But it was in fact repressed. Iraqi law is civil law, an all-encompassing construct of written codes, similar to the civil law systems of continental Europe, on which it is based. Under Saddam Hussein it was weakened in practice by widespread judicial corruption and domination of the courts, and it was hollowed out by exceptions made for Baath Party members, by special courts, and by the brazen lawlessness of the ruling regime. As a result there was little faith in the law, and eventually little understanding of it even as an ideal, but to the extent that fear can replace the social contract, the rules were enforceable, and Baghdad remained a well-mannered place. Street crime was rare. People kept their weapons at home. When they wanted to celebrate, and were overcome by that powerful biological need to fire Kalashnikovs into the air, they shot surreptitiously from behind their garden walls, and then squirreled the guns away.

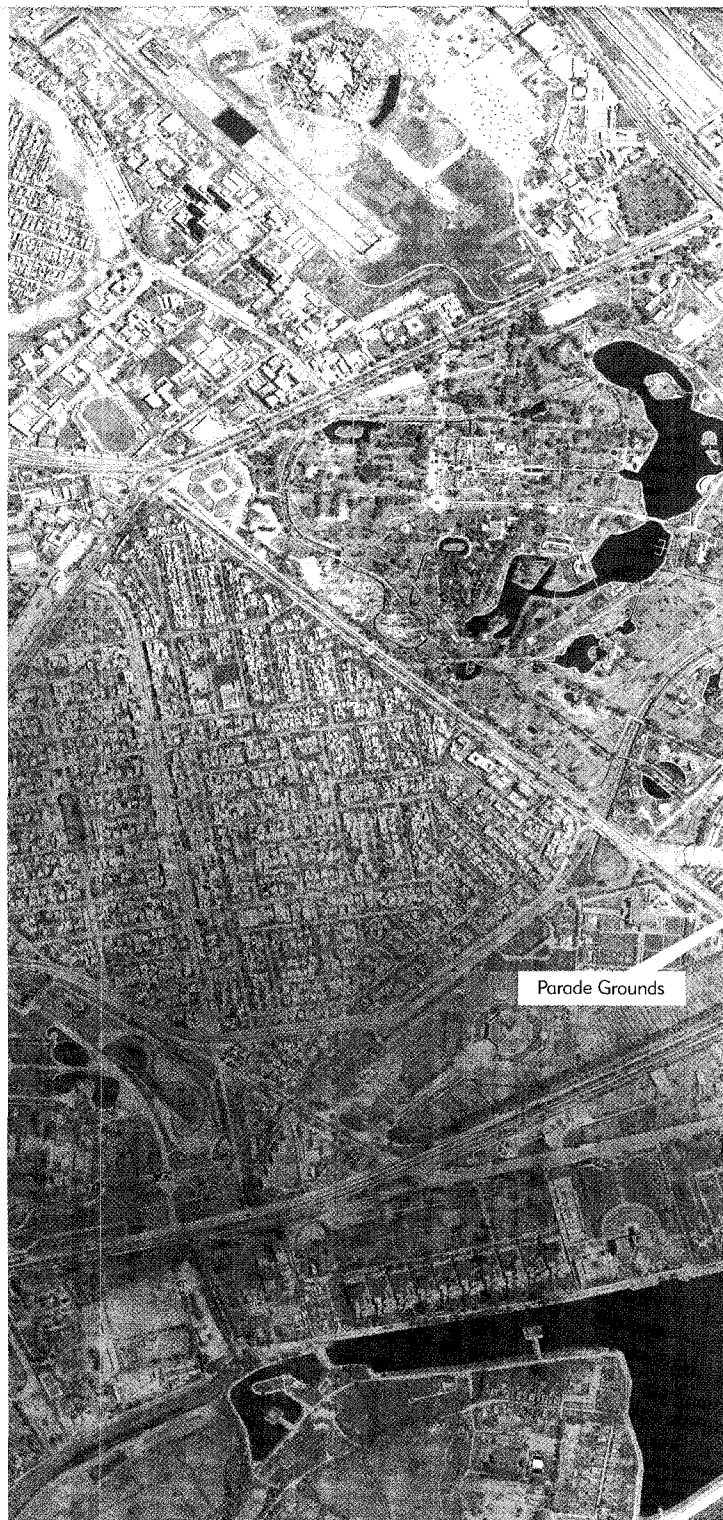
They were good drivers, too. Private cars were heavily taxed and restricted to the lucky few, and so traffic was light, and movement within the city was relatively smooth. It helped that there was a heavy presence of traffic police. They stood unarmed at all the important intersections and



traffic circles, regulating the flow and stopping drivers for violations as minor as missing a light or overusing a horn. Many of these policemen were rail-thin. They were grossly underpaid, but allowed to collect fines in cash on the spot and, informally, to siphon off enough of the proceeds to allow their families to survive. From the public's point of view it made little difference: there was enough discipline in the system to prevent the traffic police from regularly fining drivers on false pretenses, yet the siphoning provided incentive to ensure that legal details would be enforced. And these police were not of the lethal sort—the security forces responsible for so much killing and repression. It is true that they had some power, and that this led to abuses, but they had a functioning internal-affairs branch, and for the most part were just plain traffic cops. After the invasion this is what the Americans lacked the worldliness to understand. When they tried, briefly, to let the traffic police continue to function, what mostly they saw was corruption, which they disapproved of puritanically, as missionaries do.

But that's getting ahead of the story. First, and now famously, when the lid came off Iraq in April of 2003, Baghdad fell completely apart. The failures of the ideologues in Washington, D.C., to anticipate this should stand for years as a warning against political arrogance and the dangers of formulaic world views, but in fairness, on the streets of Baghdad the thinking was no better and the surprise was equally complete. After years of strong government, suddenly pure anarchy reigned, and Iraqis were introduced to the most elemental forms of survival and predation. An acquaintance of mine witnessed a typical attack on a crowded sidewalk in the central city: a middle-aged man was walking home from the market with two bags of groceries in his arms when he was accosted by a knife-wielding youth demanding his food and money. Pedestrians passing by saw this, and did not intervene. The middle-aged man put down his groceries and reached into his pocket, but instead of coming up with a wallet, came up with a gun. He did not use it to chase his assailant away, but without a word *thumbed off the safety and shot the would-be thief dead in the head*. An approving crowd then gathered and urged the man to flee, not before the Americans galloped onto the scene (there was no risk of that) but before someone from the dead youth's family arrived to exact vengeance. The man pocketed the gun, picked up his groceries, and calmly walked away. Over the year and a half since the invasion, Baghdad has been filled with such robberies and killings without consequence—grave disorders that continue to present dangers today.

There is something to be said in favor of anarchy nonetheless. However brutal and unjust it may be, on the level of the street it offers the ultimate in market freedom—something like a shopkeeper's paradise. It is significant, for instance, that the man who was attacked was not merely out strolling but was heading home carrying a full load



of groceries, including, probably, the superbly fresh vegetables and fruits that have been widely available in the city, and at a good price. Personally, I've found this to be one of the more striking details of life in Baghdad: even during the toughest weeks of the insurrection last spring, when American supply lines from Kuwait were interrupted and quantities at the meals in the Green Zone were temporarily reduced, there was abundant food in the rest of the city, which as usual included bananas—beautiful, perfectly ripe, unblemished *Ecuadorian* bananas, of a quality hard to find in Paris or New York, hanging in bunches in front of every little grocery store.





SATELLITE PHOTO: DIGITAL GLOBE

More recently, last June during the tense run-up to Iraqi sovereignty, when Americans in the Green Zone were formally locked down and required to walk around carrying flak jackets and helmets, Iraqis seemed bewildered by the overwrought advice being disseminated by U.S. officials, that those of us living out in the city should stock up on food and bottled water—as if the outbreak of civil war might somehow cause the shops to close, or the supplies to dry up. The point is that the Iraqis' recent experience has been exactly the opposite. Would you prefer beef, fish, or free-range chicken? Chinese, Lebanese, or American cuisine? Cool, watery cucumbers? Fresh greens, or carrots,

or tomatoes with actual taste? Do you prefer red or green apples, Pepsi or Coke? And how about Scottish malts, Iranian caviar, Cuban cigars, or, better yet, a wide variety of weapons and explosives at discount prices? You can buy a new AK-47 with a folding stock, never fired and fresh out of the crate, for \$170. A top-end Iraqi pistol costs about three times as much. But you need only about \$15 for enough C-4 to waste an armored car, and hand grenades are cheaper still. You can also buy three sizes of mortars, and different kinds of rockets, too. I've heard that the problem with shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles is that the batteries go bad, and are hard to replace. I've also heard of a Russian



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tank for sale, and I only half doubt it. Of course there are security and logistical problems for Westerners who want to go shopping in Iraq these days—for potato chips, let alone weaponry—and you've got to have friends, as well as cash in hand. But with a bit of patience, in Baghdad you can find almost anything you could want.

If you were a typical Iraqi man, what you would want most of all, after a weapon and a woman, is a car. This became obvious soon after the lid came off. Early during the occupation, the U.S. Army reacted with typical expediency to the corruption among the traffic police, and to other problems perceived in the law—by formally suspending enforcement of the Iraqi traffic code. The police did not exactly lose their jobs, but they were left with nothing to do. This worked well enough as long as traffic was light. Simultaneously, however, a long-repressed market sprang to life, and with no vehicle registration or driver's licensing required, no taxes to be paid, and indeed no controls of any kind, torrents of used cars began flowing down the highways toward Baghdad, from across the borders with Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait. Those torrents continue largely unabated today. Though most of the new arrivals are lightweight Toyotas, Hyundais, or sagging Chevrolets, the market has developed a strong preference for German luxury sedans, many apparently stolen in Europe and whisked away with the original license plates still in place. These are not grandmas' hand-me-downs but late-model cars with powerful motors, the bigger the better in an oil-rich country where you can still fill your tank for a dollar. They sell for about a fourth of what they would bring in the West. So many have flooded in by now that the best way to move inconspicuously through Iraq is in a freshly battered BMW, perhaps burning a little oil, but with an engine still strong enough for quick getaways.

The fresh battering comes naturally, as does the engine wear. Quick getaways, on the other hand, require maneuvering room, which inside the city has become increasingly rare. In fact, so many cars of so many descriptions arrived so fast that by the end of the summer of 2003 the streets of Baghdad were filled to the point of gridlock. It did not help that they were also filled with untrained and unidentifiable drivers, whose inexperience in no sense diminished their assertiveness and taste for speed. With the traffic police now sidelined, the only workable technique for negotiating busy intersections was to assume the right-of-way and to keep moving if at all possible, swerving at close quarters to avoid crashing. A Kurdish friend of mine witnessed an argument between two drivers after one of the innumerable smashups, during which one man shouted, "What kind of driving was that?!" and the other shouted back, "This is a democracy now, and I can drive as I please!"

Add to that the complications of an expanding guerrilla war, and the presence of U.S. military patrols—generally

groups of machine-gun-equipped Humvees, operated by tense and frustrated GIs who swung their weapons at the surrounding traffic and were more than ready to shoot. If there was one remaining road rule in Iraq, it was to stay well behind those patrols, because of the understandable tendency of American soldiers to fire back indiscriminately when attacked. There are many stories, glossed over in official reports, of innocent Iraqis who were shredded in their cars because they happened to drive too close to a patrol that had been bombed or fired upon. Sometimes entire families died that way. Iraqis blamed the soldiers, but the soldiers were not really the ones at fault: they had been plucked from home by the highest councils of the United States, flown to a bewildering place, and plopped into a fight without front lines. They were draped with lethal devices and dressed like battle robots in body armor, boots, and wraparound ballistic sunglasses, but beneath their stony façades they were just regular young American guys, many of them peering out at the world for the first time. One in ten seemed to be a Californian with ties to the beach. Only the most exceptional of them could have made sense of this city, or distinguished between acts of aggression and normal driving on these newly anarchic streets.

The soldiers themselves did not always handle their vehicles well. They stopped traffic rudely, jumped the medians of divided boulevards, forced cars off the road, sideswiped passing motorcycles, drove on the sidewalks, and busted through intersections shouting profanities and brandishing their guns. This was loosely called "tactical driving," and on a battlefield where traffic jams pose a deadly threat, it certainly helped some soldiers to survive. But the soldiers also drove that way simply because they could, because to be at war and overseas, despite the hardship involved, is in some manner to feel free. They had imitators, too, who tended to be less disciplined and more extreme. These were the commercial bodyguards—mostly British, American, and South African—who formed heavily armed units known as personal-security details, or PSDs. There were thousands of these civilian warriors in Iraq, providing protection for everyone from the American consul Paul Bremer to the technicians out working on the electric grid. The best of them were former soldiers of their national special forces, and they were serious and discreet. But plenty were cowboys, too, and upon emerging from the Green Zone they drove in showy clusters of SUVs, nose to tail, cutting off traffic and careening down the streets as if they were taking fire. I thought they were rather too pumped up. But many young Iraqis were impressed and thought that their driving was to be admired.

By the fall of 2003 the vehicular anarchy was full-blown. On the large divided highways leading into town drivers routinely hit 100 miles an hour, and more if they could, swerving among creeping tanker trucks and nearly stationary donkey carts, passing on the shoulders, ignoring scur-



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rying pedestrians, and blowing through the cross traffic with abandon. Actually there was a lot to be said for this sort of driving, once you accepted that a seat belt wouldn't matter even if you bothered to put it on. But there were frustrations, too. They came in the slow lines at the nearly worthless checkpoints, and more maddeningly behind the plodding U.S. military convoys, particularly those carrying supplies. The convoys could delay you for a hundred miles or for ten. At the tail end there was always a Bradley or a Humvee with a machine gunner looking backward, whose job was to keep the following traffic at a safe distance, about a hundred yards behind. The traffic would jockey madly for position (why I don't know, given the risk of getting shot) until some brave driver would swerve across the median to pass the convoy on the opposite side of the highway, now moving the wrong way against high-speed oncoming traffic. If the soldiers were in a sporting mood and allowed the maneuver to succeed, a herd of other cars would go bumping across the median and string out single file behind the leader, accelerating to keep close behind. Now came the catch: once established on the wrong side of the road, and having passed the U.S. convoy, the drivers could not return to the right side of the road, because the oncoming traffic, having split apart to avoid head-on collision, was now either driving on the inside shoulder or had itself crossed the median, and was locked into its own high-speed file on the wrong side of the road. Further divisions of the traffic flow were then possible. I was once embedded in one of seven columns that were passing one another in alternate strings of high-speed flows along both sides of a four-lane divided highway, and with a symmetry that was quite beautiful to behold.

But then came Baghdad itself, with its helter-skelter intersections where all the symmetry crumbled and gridlock set in. The gridlock posed threats to Westerners and their Iraqi friends, who become stationary targets, vulnerable to attack. The streets then had the feel of a hunting ground where you were the quarry with no room to run. It helped to carry weapons, but the mood could be tense. Unless of course you qualified to escape into the peace and space of the Green Zone.

Living in isolation was not what the American administrators had in mind when they first came to the Green Zone on the heels of the invasion, in April of 2003. The original team was known as the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance, or ORHA. It was headed by a retired general named Jay Garner, who was assisted by a group of former officers and ambassadors, all of whom were high-powered and competent people. They were an affable, self-deprecating bunch, given to calling themselves "space cowboys," in reference not to their state of mind but to a Clint Eastwood comedy in which a group of aging astronauts are called out of retirement to make one final flight.

After weeks impatiently waiting in a five-star hotel in Kuwait, they established their administration in the vandalized and looted Republican Palace, where they slept on cots, and gladly endured the heat and dust and confusion of the time. People later came to name them Orhanians. They were folksy and unafraid. They were also on a wildly optimistic mission. Washington had decided that war is like surgery, and that all that was needed now was to fill in for the top Baathists who had been excised. According to that model (which included the Iraqi public's adoring acceptance of their liberators), the Iraqi government would continue to function, and society would remain intact. With that in mind, the Orhanians were utterly unprepared to handle the dual reality of governmental disintegration and catastrophic social collapse.

And so in came the Cpathians. Paul Bremer arrived on May 12, 2003, with instruction to assume full governmental control. Bremer seemed made for this task. He was a tough, shrewd operative with strong conservative credentials, who had initially risen through the State Department, but was certainly no diplomatic pansy. In Washington he was considered to be an expert on terrorism. With his own people he was severe. His attitude, one of them said to me, was "You're here for the mission. Get the job done. If you can't cut it, fuck off." Fine. Bremer was not big on compliments. He was smart, flexible, and very hard-working. He called Washington, D.C., "the squirrel cage" and detested getting caught up in it. Even those who bore the brunt of his scorn admired him for his style. He was the Dude exuding power, the Anointed One. He would fly around Iraq in the early days, dressed in a business suit and combat boots, responding to the immediate problems that he encountered, and snapping out orders to make things right. This was not necessarily the best way to go about running a nation ("I want a law prohibiting potholes" is how someone described it to me), and follow-up turned out to be a problem, but Bremer was confident and decisive, and so, therefore, was his newly formed CPA.

Those were heady times. People in the Green Zone talked about democracy, and they believed in it in the long run, but for many of them the more immediate operative belief was that the potential for personal wealth and comfort could be made to prevail over all other forces in Iraqi society. The handouts would end, and business opportunity would win the peace: Iraq would be remade into the American ideal of a free-market state. Because Iraq had had a socialist economy for generations, dominated by large state-owned enterprises, this was a radical goal—and certainly far beyond the mandate of the U.S.-led invasion. However, the CPA had essentially unlimited resources to spend preparing the ground, and the assistance of the contractors who were arriving in force; there seemed to be no limit to what could be achieved. The assumption was that the United States would maintain full and formal control for several years, and that the political environment would be benign. The United States, in other words, was going to



found a whole new nation, and worry about the political structure and the transition to sovereignty later on. Moreover, there would be no need to negotiate with stubborn constituencies like those that fetter business back home. In Iraq things were going to get done, simply because no one would say no. Of course, the Iraqis then turned out to be the most stubborn constituents of all. But those troubles were still to come. For the first few months the country was relatively docile, and Iraq seemed almost like a blank slate. For people at the CPA that was the thrilling side of the breakdown that had occurred. In the Green Zone you could make a mark on history.

There were excesses, as might be imagined. The hiring of the senior CPA staff was steered by Donald Rumsfeld and his conservative deputies at the Pentagon, who, by insisting on rigid agendas, effectively ruled out some of the more worldly officials and diplomats who might otherwise have been willing to intervene. In their place came zealous amateurs, often from the private sector, whose chief qualifications seemed to be their Republican credentials and their eagerness to get involved. To their credit, most of them eased off the ideology once they faced the practical realities of Iraq. They muddled through and sometimes got something done before getting out; they left no marks.

A few of the most zealous, however, refused to back down, and, indeed, upon arriving in the Green Zone seemed to think of Iraq as a living laboratory, a testing ground for their ideas. A high-ranking military officer with deep experience in the turmoil of the Third World, and who had worked closely with these people, later described them to me with a mixture of wonder and amusement. One of the characters was a cigar-chewing banker, who at that time was the president of Michigan State. He was a Republican partisan named Peter McPherson, whose obsession for a while seemed to be to keep the French out. The officer laughed hard remembering this. He said, "He was so fucking paranoid about the French! He was absolutely rabid! He wanted to make sure they didn't get a look into anything. We went through this discussion about the mobile phones, the networks, because you know the French are big in the region in mobile phones. McPherson wanted to find a way to construct a public tender that would"—he laughed again—"that would somehow exclude the French." If so, apparently he did not entirely succeed: The Egyptians won the contract for central Iraq, but awarded a large contract in turn to the French communications company Alcatel. So much for lofty thoughts. McPherson eventually returned to Michigan State.

Then there was a businessman from Connecticut named Thomas Foley, who was an old friend of George W. Bush's, and a major contributor to the Republican Party. Officially Foley was the CPA's director of private-sector development. In translation, according to the high-ranking officer, this meant "he was a wealthy guy who came in to play with Iraq." I asked the officer what Foley had in mind. He said, "These

incredible ideas of what to do with the state-owned enterprises, and various things that never happened, thankfully ... His idea with the state-owned enterprises was just shut them down, trash them, and throw everyone onto the street. With no safety net at all. Just a sharp shock thing. Get rid of them, and let private industry take over in the void. We'd already had a disaster with the decision to disband the Iraqi army in the early days here." That decision, which was made in Washington and forced onto Bremer in May of 2003, is generally acknowledged to have been the worst of the American occupation, directly related to the competence and intensity of the insurrection that followed. The officer, who had been there at the time, said, "That was just so *stupid*. They had no duty-out plan. No demobilization plan. It was a mistake."

**Bremer was the Dude exuding power. He would fly around Iraq in the early days, dressed in a business suit and combat boots, snapping out orders. "I want a law prohibiting potholes" is how someone described it to me.**

Of course the sign of real stupidity is the repetition of mistakes, and the CPA proved to be sufficiently smart to avoid that, most of the time. When eventually I spoke to Foley he appeared to be mostly unaffected by the American experience in Iraq, and as convinced as ever about what he described as the inevitable progression of world history toward a future of free-market capitalism—but he admitted that his plans to hurry Iraq along that path had so far not amounted to a single privatization. I asked the officer how successful in the end the ideologues had been, and he answered not very. They had managed to get a flat tax put into law (in an oil-rich country with no tradition of income taxes—and leaving aside the problem of collection). But most of their initiatives were blocked within the CPA. The officer said, "We went down the road of trying to turn them down by consulting with the Iraqis. We hosed them off, or tried to."

Foley went home early. He was replaced by Michael Fleisher, the brother of the former White House spokesman Ari Fleisher. Michael Fleisher said that he wanted to teach the Iraqis the concept of competitive bidding for government contracts, and he explained, "The only paradigm they know is cronyism." Back in the United States, in May of 2004, Foley addressed the Chamber of Commerce of Naples, Florida, where he responded to press reports of the Iraqi insurrection by saying, "The Iraq I came to know is the exact opposite of that. It's an Iraq that is very grateful to the Americans who are there." There is no reason to doubt that Foley was sincere.

But those were the standout cases. Even from within the



Green Zone few of the Americans fooled themselves about the growing hostility of the Iraqi population—and indeed, they were if anything too concerned about it. Moreover, the idea, which was widespread among the Baghdad press corps, that the CPA was nothing but a radical neoconservative construct turned out to be operationally wrong. In practice the CPA was a broad American construct, and for better or worse it functioned as a piece of ourselves. It is true that most of the rank and file had supported the invasion, and continued to believe that they were contributing to the struggle against terrorism, but they were not ideologues so much as ordinary, overconfident, mildly presumptuous college graduates—freshly scrubbed Americans of the sort who inhabit Washington, D.C., nestling up to power.

**An observer inside the Palace explained, “They wanted to be Machiavellian, in the sense of ‘How do we shape the politics in this country?’ And every step they took to try and achieve that achieved the opposite.”**

A man from the inner circles of the Republican Palace, who was known to be a wise and experienced observer, told me I had it wrong when I said that there was something about the CPA staff that reminded me of student utopians. He said, “It wasn’t that idealistic. You’re right that there were a lot of young people who came in, particularly in the governance and policy area. Very nice, very personable people—nothing against them. But they had no knowledge whatsoever of Iraq, very very little of the region, and absolutely no prior experience in post-conflict operations. They were not so much idealistic as on a trip—a power trip. I don’t mean this in a pejorative way, but they wanted to be Machiavellian, in the sense of ‘How do we shape the politics in this country? How do we get the result of having a government friendly to the United States?’ And every step that they took to try and achieve that achieved the opposite.”

“Why?”

“Because it was manipulative. Because it was not transparent. Because it was done in every possible way *calculable* that would make the Shiites suspicious.”

If anything the maneuvers were not Machiavellian enough. In his description of an effective prince, Machiavelli wrote, “He should appear to be compassionate, faithful to his word, kind, guileless, and devout. And indeed he should be so. But his disposition should be such that if he needs to be the opposite, he knows how.” And to know how, the prince needs to understand, and never to underestimate, the people he would rule.

The introduction of a new traffic code for Iraq was hardly a page from that book. I heard elements of the story from many sources, Iraqi and American, inside the Green Zone and outside. The story began with an Army captain, a reserve officer in civil affairs. In civilian life he was a personal-injury lawyer in Maryland, some said from the suburbs, some said from a rural part of the state. I later learned his name and spoke with him, but only after his role had come to an end. He had fought his way north with the invasion, had enjoyed the period of apparent welcome that followed, and finally had been assigned to work at the CPA. True to form, he lived in the Green Zone and worked in the Palace, walking the long hallways past endless office doors, among a cast of thousands. People remember him as a good man, intense and rather humorless, but very sincere. One day, in response to Army orders, he set out to reform the native driving. This was going to be his contribution: what Iraq needed was a traffic code.

Of course Iraq already had a traffic code: the one that had been suspended by the Americans at the start of the occupation. The captain knew of the Iraqi code’s existence, but he believed that the previous system was rotten to the core. When he set out to reform the streets, he did not consult with the legal advisers at the CPA, let alone with the specialists in the Iraqi traffic police, but dug up a former traffic court judge and consulted with him. Primarily, though, he seized on a model that in his own experience had worked back home—that shining artifact of evolved self-government, the Maryland state traffic code. The code required some improvements, but the captain willingly put in the time, and by January of 2004 he had come up with a tidy package, written in English, of course—a gift from the people of Maryland to those of Iraq. There were some Palace procedures that had to be gone through: like all such initiatives generated by the occupation authority, the package would have to be approved by the appropriate American “Ministry”—in this case of Justice—and it would have to be vetted by the Office of the General Counsel, but then it could be taken to Paul Bremer, who alone had the power to sign it into law. The captain had no doubt that this would be done.

The CPA Ministry of Justice was staffed by a handful of American lawyers. Like other such ministries in the Palace, it was supposed to oversee (read “run”) the corresponding Iraqi ministry until Iraq could be given nominal sovereignty. The CPA Justice people were also involved in a special effort necessarily disassociated from any Iraqi ministry, to establish an honest and independent judiciary throughout Iraq. This was a lofty project, crucial to the legacy of the American occupation of Iraq, and of particular interest to such substantial legal figures as U.S. Supreme Court Justices Anthony Kennedy and Sandra Day O’Connor. It is hardly surprising therefore that when this uninvited initiative—this traffic code—arrived unexpectedly in the office it was shunted off and delayed.



THERE COMES A POINT WHEN KIDS FORGET THEY'RE LEARNING.  
THEIR IMAGINATIONS IGNITE. AND THAT MOMENT  
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But there were real problems with it as well. First, it suffered from a fundamental structural problem: how was this all-American package, based on the Anglo-Saxon system of common law, and therefore dependent on administrative regulations and judicial history (case law), supposed to fit into a system of civil law like Iraq's, where every detail has to be spelled out in legislation, for purposes of both criminal enforcement and civil litigation? Second, even if one was willing to ignore the conceptual misfit, in Iraqi practice a common-law code would by its very omissions implicitly legalize some of the wildest local driving. And third, what was all this about anyway? Didn't Iraq already have a traffic code? The officials at CPA Justice told the captain that they could not just sign off on his initiative, and that as a start they would call a meeting with the Iraqi traffic police. The captain went away disappointed. He saw this as a case of bureaucratic interference, and all too typical of the CPA. He believed in military occupations, and thought that had the Army been in charge things would have gotten done.

## **The Iraqis were perplexed by the traffic-code initiative. They exchanged glances as if to ask the standard question when first encountering the CPA: were these truly the same people who had put men on the moon?**

The CPA was indeed a bureaucracy. Because it was a temporary organization, cobbled together from various agencies to whom many of its officials still owed allegiance, it was crippled from the start by pre-existing turf fights. At the same time, paradoxically, it was infused with the Bush Administration's disdain for governmental process and procedure—the same attitude that led to the torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, and that later laid the CPA open to accusations of financial impropriety. Be that as it may, on the matter of the traffic code, the CPA lawyers were not being bureaucratic so much as diligent. The code was translated into Arabic, and an American adviser who was assigned to the traffic police arranged for some high-ranking Iraqi traffic officers to come to the Palace for a meeting.

The captain dutifully showed up, as did the Iraqi officers, who were a little late because they had to be escorted in by American MPs. The Arabic translation that was given to them was poor (a perennial problem at the CPA), but it was good enough for them to understand the gist of the American initiative. They were perplexed, I was later told—astonished by what they believed was the stupidity of the

document that had been handed to them. They exchanged glances as if to ask the standard Iraqi question when first encountering the CPA: could it truly be that these were the same people who had put men on the moon? As officials of high rank, they were also quite simply insulted. "Why are *you* rewriting our code?" they wanted to know. Since the answer couldn't very well be "Because we invaded you and won the war," or "Because the captain here got orders to," as the meeting continued, they gradually gained the high ground. They admitted there were improvements that needed to be made to the former traffic code, largely by including references to new safety equipment, and purging the old law of the exceptions it allowed for Baath Party members. The Iraqis proposed that they return to their headquarters and write a new code themselves. They promised to get back to the Americans with their own product within two weeks. The Americans agreed.

After the meeting, the captain remained unconvinced. Someone familiar with aspects of the saga explained, "This was his baby ... And he had started out like many people do here, with an assumption that was wrong. Which was that all the traffic police were corrupt, and that no one in Iraq was educated enough to write the law or to understand the problem." Speaking not of the captain, but of the Americans in general, the observer continued, "People just made assumptions about the level of sophistication and knowledge here. One of the Iraqi police told me a story of going to a training session given by the military, where some guy is explaining the Internet. Like, 'This is a phone.' And the Iraqi said, 'You know, we're not complete morons.' People came to the CPA, never spoke to an Iraqi, and just launched these projects." For related reasons, once the projects were launched there was a tendency within the Green Zone to believe that therefore progress had been made—often despite strong evidence on the outside that it had not.

The captain continued to push for his project, though by now it was clear to others that the Maryland code did not have a chance. Because the captain was a decent man, reasonably smart and well intentioned, people ended up feeling a little sorry for him—all the more so when late last February he was wounded in an ambush south of the city, and sent home early to heal. He had hoped to leave a legacy behind, and had worked hard and selflessly to achieve it. He had even won a slew of medals for his well demonstrated bravery and dedication. But he had been largely thwarted during his stay in Iraq. To make matters worse, an increasing number of skeptics in the Green Zone suspected that his story was the story of the American occupation itself.

Meanwhile, after two weeks of hard work the Iraqi police produced their draft, in Arabic, and the Americans had it translated in a rush. Again the two sides sat down for a meeting in the Palace. What the Americans saw before them was an unusual document, a traffic code that was appar-



ently compatible with a civil law system, and that had been cleaned of references to the Baath Party, but that seemed at times to be too eager, if not completely nuts. It included, for instance, a provision against standing on the seats while a car is under way, and another against talking to the driver. Even more strangely, given the habits of Iraqis, it banned smoking in cars. One of the Americans there remembers thinking, "Well, it's not *our* country ... And it's true, after all, that smoking is not good for people's health."

The Americans, in other words, were trying hard to be sensitive, and they were determined to accommodate the Iraqi perspective. Entering into the spirit of things, one of them brought up a relatively recent stateside harassment—how about a nicely progressive provision against the use of cell phones while driving? When this was translated for the Iraqis, the commanding general answered that he was against it. Cell phones had been outlawed by the Baath regime, along with satellite dishes and even street maps. The general did not explain the history, but said, "You know, the Iraqi people are just getting some freedom, so I don't want to include that at this time." By now the Americans were thoroughly confused: in this new society being cooked up, drivers could use their cell phones, but they would not have the freedom to smoke? What was the logic here? A long and typically American discussion ensued, in English, pertaining to which of these various behaviors might be considered to be most dangerous. The Iraqis followed the discussion as best they could through the summaries of one of their officers, a colonel who understood English, but they were bewildered. One might expect that their confusion had something to do with the distance between such deliberations and the realities on the violent streets outside, where danger took the form of guerrilla attacks and high-speed anarchic driving. But their problem was more procedural than that: a smoking ban? Again they exchanged glances. They assumed that this was another strange American initiative, because they themselves had never written any such prohibition into the driving code. And so the Americans kept talking on.

It took most of the meeting to sort things out. The problem lay in the translation. As it turned out, while converting the Arabic document into English the CPA staff had somehow jumbled the categories, so that some of the laws meant to regulate public transport—no standing on the seats, no talking to the driver, and no smoking while riding the bus—had been mixed in to the sections pertaining to the operation of private cars. Further modifications were made to the proposed traffic code, particularly one that attempted to reduce corruption by eliminating the collection of fines in cash on the spot—in a place still essentially without banks, checks, or credit cards. One of the paradoxes of the story is that in this and other details of the emerging law, the new Iraqi code was often quite similar to what the captain had originally proposed. This

was civil law versus common law, yes, but history rarely presents such simple oppositions.

In any case, the weeks and months went by. Fighting broke out in Fallujah and beyond, and the police went through various upheavals. As Iraq grew wilder, the vehicular anarchy grew in kind. The U.S. Army weighed in, saying that gridlock was posing a serious security threat to its patrols, and that something had to be done about it. Now the Iraqis were in a hurry too, because they hoped somehow to levy fines. As a result the traffic code was "fast-tracked," meaning that unlike other CPA laws, it did not have to wait for comment from Canberra, London, and Washington, D.C. Late last May, Paul Bremer signed a new Iraqi traffic code into law. One month later, when the CPA's existence was nearing its end, it was possible to imagine, if you squinted hard, that the traffic in Baghdad was becoming a little more orderly. Frankly, however, the traffic code was less of a factor in the improvement than was the heavy presence of Iraqi police at the city center in those days leading up to the birth of a nominally independent Iraqi state.

**M**isreadings much larger than confusion over traffic were at play in the Green Zone. One point made to me by an insider was that Americans had approached Iraq with Algerian and Iranian models in mind. They believed that given the chance, the Shiites, who constitute a majority in Iraq, would vote themselves into power and then install a fundamentalist theocracy, which would become a puppet of Iran. The insider said, "And, uh, *wrong* on both counts. Because ninety-five percent of the Shiite population did not want a theocracy. And they *hated* Iran ... But the Americans were looking at Iraq through all these incorrect prisms. They expected to be here for a while, and to manage the whole process, and shape how the politics developed, and neutralize the Shiites, and promote their own people. So they set up this 'Iraqi Governing Council' that promoted guys—like Ahmed Chalabi—they had worked with outside of Iraq, which was completely the wrong way to go. I mean, we knew that Chalabi was less popular in Iraq than Saddam Hussein. And the Iraqi Governing Council was detested by everybody in the country. It was seen as a CPA creature, seen as undemocratic, and seen as a group of outsiders—featherbedders who were only interested in themselves. It never got any acceptability. All it did was drag us down." But the CPA was visibly afraid of democracy, he said, and it was distracted by the pet theories of economic reforms. "That's where we went off the rails," he said. "Badly."

As train wrecks go, this one was barely perceptible at first. During the summer of 2003, even as the frequency of Iraqi attacks began to grow, the most noticeable change for foreign residents of the Green Zone was that life had taken a turn for the better. Gone was the Spartan existence of the first few months, when even good drinking water



could be hard to find. By now the contractors had settled their crews into compounds and expropriated residences, and they were making the places comfortable. As the CPA and the contractors staffed up, thousands of new arrivals and replacements came onto the scene, including a good number of women, and people began to take the time to socialize. It was a particularly hot summer all through Europe and the Middle East, but the air-conditioning now functioned in the Palace and elsewhere, and enough generators had been brought in to avoid the power outages that afflicted the city. At the center of the operation, the CPA employees still slept in the Palace, on cots scattered all about. They worked there, too, in little offices crammed with desks and a growing number of computers, for the various ministries that made up the occupation government. In alphabetical order the ministries included Agriculture, Communication, Construction & Housing, Culture, Education, Electricity, Environment, Expatriates & Immigrants, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Health, Higher Education, Human Rights, Industry & Minerals, Interior, Irrigation, Justice, Labor & Social Affairs, Oil, Planning, Public Works, Science & Technology, Trade, Transport, and Youth & Sports. Clearly, some of these were more important than others, and some were more demanding, but even in offices where there was not much to do, people arrived by 8:00 A.M. and often stayed through the evening, if only sometimes to watch DVDs; they had nowhere to go home to anyway.

**The dancing was sexual, as, increasingly, was the after-hours Green Zone social life. There were elements of frustration involved, but also of special opportunity. In the isolation and shared circumstances, people fell easily in love.**

By July of that summer, a couple of months after the founding of the CPA, a fourteen-floor luxury hotel named the Rashid had reopened within the bounds of the Green Zone, on the far-northern side, and about 700 CPA employees moved in to make it their home. They lived there two to a room with private cold-water bathrooms attached, and found that by comparison to their Palace quarters it was some sort of paradise. The Rashid was an authentic showpiece of the former regime, decorated in heavy Middle Eastern style. Kellogg Brown & Root had converted a ballroom into a standard CPA chow hall, but otherwise the place was almost untouched. It offered risk-free souvenir shopping, a coffee shop, a more formal Middle Eastern restaurant, a second-floor discotheque, an outside pool,

and two extremely popular bars. Just three months earlier the discotheque had been the special preserve of Uday, Saddam's psychopathic son. It was said that his invitations to carouse there were dreaded by the recipients, who dared not decline but feared his habits of raping the women he fancied and gunning people down. Now the CPA staff packed in on Thursday nights, and danced across a lit and inlaid Baath Party star.

The dancing was sexual, as, increasingly, was the after-hours Green Zone social life. There were elements of frustration involved, but also of special opportunity. Poolside, women were surrounded by gaggles of admiring men. A few went wild, or began to preen like movie stars—behavior that added spark to an otherwise utilitarian culture. In the isolation and shared circumstances, people fell easily in love. Some marriages resulted. These were the glory days at the CPA, the ones remembered later with fondness and regret. Baghdad was certainly never a holiday spot. Between songs at the discotheque you could sometimes hear firefights in the distance—and the fact that GIs and Iraqis were out there fighting and falling was a reality that no one forgot. Nonetheless, it was still quite safe to move around the city. Many of the Americans confined themselves to the Green Zone out of discomfort with the unknown, but the best of the CPA staff went out often, whether to consult with Iraqi officials or simply to explore. They drove, or took taxis at the Green Zone gates. Traffic was thick, but at night it thinned down. There were some good restaurants on the far side of the river. Westerners learned to sit away from the front windows, as much for discretion as to avoid broken glass in case of a blast. But without undue concern they could even walk around.

However, as the summer stretched on, the insurgents ramped up their offensive and began to go after civilian targets that were unfortified, or relatively easily attacked. On Tuesday, August 19, 2003, at about 4:30 in the afternoon, a truck came crashing through the thin defenses surrounding the Canal Hotel, across the Tigris and about three miles from the Green Zone. The Canal Hotel was the United Nations' headquarters in Iraq. The truck exploded against it with a characteristic thump that broke windows for a half mile around and was heard throughout the city. A section of the hotel's roof collapsed, wounding at least a hundred people and killing another twenty-two. One of the dead was the beloved UN envoy, a fifty-five-year-old Brazilian diplomat named Sergio Vieira de Mello, who had been appointed the UN's High Commissioner for Human Rights, and was about to leave for Geneva. He lay trapped in the rubble for several hours before succumbing. Afterward the United Nations began to withdraw from Iraq. In the Green Zone, where antipathy for the UN ran strong, the retreat was noted without great concern. These were high times still at the Rashid Hotel.

But ten days after the UN bombing a car bomb killed



as many as ninety-five people, mostly pilgrims, in the Shiite city of Najaf, about one hundred and ten miles to the south, and Iraq teetered toward civil war before it teetered back. In Baghdad there were increasing numbers of relatively minor hits—kidnappings, political murders, grenade and small-arms attacks. This peppering was significant largely because it was pulled off with such impunity; though the prisons were full of potential enemies, very few of the real aggressors were ever identified and caught. The truth is that with no functioning police, few real friends, and still only a sketchy knowledge of the streets, the United States really had no idea how to respond. Implicitly the problem was acknowledged early on. In Washington people spoke before Congress and on TV about the need for more soldiers on the ground, as if those soldiers could serve as a local police force. Had the speakers come to Iraq and taken the time to observe, quietly and unprotected, they would have seen that even just Baghdad is a very large place, and that the U.S. armored patrols rolled through at considerable personal risk, but with only fleeting effect. Iraq opened briefly to let them pass and then immediately closed in behind. The United States had put itself into a bind from which it would not be able simply to spend or fight its way free. And the Iraqi resistance knew it, even if those in Washington did not yet quite.

On September 2, 2003, the Iraqi police headquarters in Baghdad were car-bombed, leaving one dead and perhaps twenty-five wounded. A lull followed, during which, however, military patrols continued to come under regular attack, with loss of life on both sides. Then, on September 20, one of the three female members of the U.S.-installed governing council, Akila al-Hashimi, was shot and grievously wounded. On September 22 the Canal Hotel was hit for the second time, now in a parking lot at some distance from an area where the UN's rearguard staff occupied some trailers; nineteen people were injured, and two died. On September 25 the hotel where NBC television crews stayed was bombed, with the loss of a guard. That same day in the hospital Akila al-Hashimi died. Briefly, then, the war came even closer to home: on the morning of September 27 insurgents fired three explosive projectiles against the Rashid. Several Americans were sitting in the lower-level bar watching sports on TV when an Iraqi came in and announced that the hotel had been hit. True to form for the CPA, the Americans reserved judgment until, very quickly, they found the news on TV. One of them later told me how strange it was to see a live image of the Rashid above a banner about an ongoing attack, knowing that he was on the inside and still calmly sipping a drink. In fact the attack was already long over. One projectile had gone into the top floor, one into the hotel yard, and one into a house outside the Green Zone. There were no casualties. The perpetrators were not caught. The Americans could not even figure out what kind of projectiles had been fired.

The troubles accelerated. On October 4, the day scheduled for the last meager payouts to members of the disbanded Iraqi army, former Iraqi soldiers demonstrated violently in Baghdad and other cities. American and British troops responded with gunfire, leaving three Iraqis dead and untold numbers wounded. This was clearly not the right way to lay people off. On October 9 a car bomb devastated a police station in the Baghdad slum called Sadr City, with the loss of ten lives. That same day a Spanish diplomat was assassinated. On October 12, in the center of the city, a hotel called the Baghdad was bombed. The Baghdad housed American contractors and security men, Iraqi Governing Council members, and it was widely believed though officially denied, several employees of the Central Intelligence Agency. Eight people died, and thirty-eight were seriously wounded. This was the seventh fatal car-bomb attack on Washington's allies and collaborators since early August. All that same week tensions were rising fast in Fallujah, to the west. They were the same tensions that escalated into the pitched battles of the spring, when American forces were held off and much of the country then erupted into the sustained and open warfare that, with periods of calm, continues to afflict it today. On October 14 the Turkish embassy was bombed, and one person died. Mortar attacks on the Green Zone, until recently unheard of, were suddenly on the rise.

Such a list is of course compressed, and it tends to exaggerate the dangers of the time. For civilians at the CPA, as for soldiers not immediately engaged in shooting, the war was mostly just sound and aftermath, and for long intervals it was nothing at all. Some from the Green Zone continued to go out into the city, and the nation beyond, and as much for enjoyment as for work. Yes, there was war, but it was still reasonable, for instance, to sit at the sidewalk cafés in the central city. Indeed, though it was wise not to establish patterns, you could continue to do this through the fall and winter and into the spring, at which point sitting at the cafés became no longer reasonable at all.

The shock to the Green Zone was severe, therefore, when the Rashid was hit again, and this time hard. The attack happened on Sunday, October 26, 2003, at 6:08 A.M., when most of the residents were still in their rooms. Paul Wolfowitz, the Pentagon official responsible for much of what had gone wrong in Iraq, was visiting Baghdad on a typically quick tour at the time, and was staying at the Rashid on the twelfth floor. It is not known how good the attackers' information was, or if he was the target. Also staying at the hotel was an acquaintance of mine, an Australian military lawyer named Michael Kelly, who is in some ways Wolfowitz's antithesis—a calm and confident soldier who understands the complexity of the world and is respected for the balance of his judgment and his knowledge of international law. Readers may recognize that he shares the name of *The Atlantic's* former editor and cor-



respondent, who seven months earlier had been killed in combat near the Baghdad airport. The Australian Kelly had arrived in Baghdad immediately afterward, with Jay Garner's ORHA, and he had stayed on in Iraq, traveling the country extensively, helping to set up independent Iraqi courts, and advising Paul Bremer on the legalities of the initiatives sent his way; people said he had done some of the best work at the CPA.

Kelly had a room to himself on the Rashid's seventh floor. At dawn on October 26 he rose and went into the bathroom to shower and shave. At about the same time, Iraqi guerrillas maneuvered a blue enclosed trailer into position about 1,300 feet away, on a street just outside the Green Zone's walls, within full view of the hotel. The trailer held rockets in launch tubes, arranged in rows and oriented to fire rearward. The guerrillas unhitched it, raised the rear door, and drove away; they were seen by an Iraqi policeman down the street, who did not understand their intentions, and might not have wanted to interfere anyway. Immediately afterward the rockets fired in sequence, having been triggered by either a timer or a remote control. Perhaps twelve of them launched successfully, and just as many "cooked off" in their tubes from the resulting heat. Such wastage was a standard technical problem for Iraqi insurgents, who tended to build their tubes too close together, and to brace their smaller launch platforms inadequately.

**Guerrillas maneuvered a blue enclosed trailer into position just outside the Green Zone walls. It held rockets in launch tubes. The rockets fired in sequence, having been triggered by either a timer or a remote control.**

Still, the rockets in the air were enough. One or two of them flew low, and blew a hole into the Green Zone wall, but as many as ten flew straight and true and slammed into the face of the hotel. They hit between the third and eleventh floors, sparing Wolfowitz but killing one man and wounding fifteen others, some severely.

Kelly was shaving when the rockets came in. The room next to his, which was unoccupied, took a direct hit and was destroyed. Kelly never mentioned this to me, but it was known to his friends that before escaping he finished shaving and dressed. He was steady by nature, and understood the reality of the attack: if you were not already dead or injured, you were probably safe. "No worries, mate!" he liked to say. But when he emerged into the hallway, he realized that the Rashid had suffered a serious blow: the hallway was thick with smoke, dust, and the smell of cord-

ite, and when Kelly climbed down the stairwell it was slick with blood all the way to the ground floor.

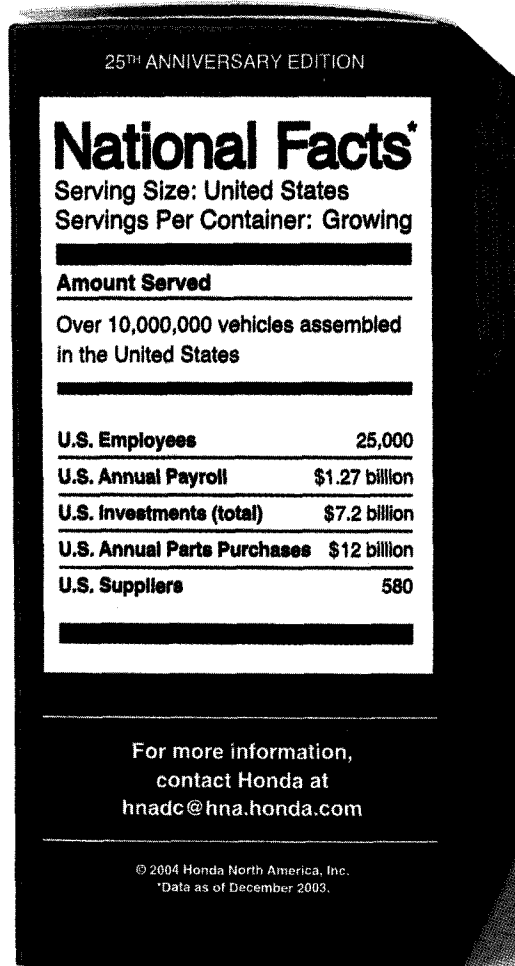
The arm of a twenty-four-year-old woman hung by a thread; she was rushed to the Green Zone hospital, a specialized combat facility, where doctors heroically sewed the arm back on. Other injuries were nearly as bad. So this time, after all, there were worries, mate. And indeed, the man who died was Kelly's friend. He was a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel named Charles H. Buehring, age forty, who worked at the Palace in public affairs, and still counts today, nineteen months after the onset of war, as one of the highest-ranking American officers killed in Iraq. His room in the Rashid was on the eleventh floor. Kelly said that at the start of the attack Buehring had rushed with his M-16 to the window to fight back, and that he had been hit there.

Wolfowitz was one floor higher. When he arrived in the lobby, he was unshaven but dressed. Some reporters wrote that he was visibly shaken, but this seems too poetic or wishful to have been true. More believable were the reports that he was stubborn and resolute. At an impromptu press conference he said, "We're not giving up on this job." Although it was possible to feign uncertainty over his definitions, people understood precisely which job he meant. He also said, "They're not going to scare us away." He then visited a police station and the hospital, and went out on an armored "reconnaissance" patrol. When he left that night and flew back to Washington, his press people asserted the obvious—that his departure had long been scheduled, and that it did not reflect his personal concern for safety. Their assertion was made in the larger context of superficial needling by reporters, and was itself rather silly. But relations with the press were growing very thin.

Kelly told me that the attackers escaped in part because the Green Zone wall had protected them from pursuit. A joke went around that they would wait to attack again until the section damaged by their rocket was repaired. The Rashid was evacuated. With typical competence, the site managers at Kellogg Brown & Root quickly found emergency accommodations for the hotel residents in nooks and crannies throughout the Green Zone. That same day in Baghdad a deputy mayor came home from an international conference in Madrid, where countries had pledged to donate reconstruction funds to Iraq. When he got to his house, he told his family that he was going to turn Baghdad into heaven. But in the evening he went out to a café, and while he was sitting there playing dominoes, two gunmen shot him dead and walked away. The next day, October 27, was the first day of Ramadan. Within forty-five minutes four car bombs exploded in the city, including one against the headquarters of the International Red Cross. Thirty-five people died, and at least 200 were wounded. The Green Zone was mortared. Four days later there were riots in the city. A Chinook helicopter loaded with soldiers was shot down, and soon afterward a Black Hawk was lost. Iraq



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seemed to be unraveling fast. Within days the Red Cross reduced its staff, Doctors Without Borders moved its headquarters to Amman, and the United Nations completed its withdrawal of non-Iraqi employees from Baghdad.

The Rashid attack marked the start of an escalation that became known as the Ramadan Offensive. It led to the near doubling of American military deaths due to hostile fire—seventy dead soldiers in just the month of November. Paul Wolfowitz had said that Americans would not be frightened away, and if he meant Americans as individuals, he was mostly right. Quite a few civilians did flee Iraq, but most opted to tough it out. For some it was even an exhilarating time. Inside the Green Zone there was a sense of emergency and siege. Rumors were rife of an imminent assault, during which 600 diehard fedayeen would come over the Green Zone walls. People had Vietnam's Tet Offensive in mind. New "force protection" rules were put into effect, severely limiting access to the city. There was talk of "sleepers" in the slums on the inside. Even the Iraqis working for the CPA were suspect. Palace defenses, already strong, were made stronger still, so that the Palace became the Green Zone's Green Zone, as it remains today. A "town hall" meeting was called to allay fears, but it had the opposite effect. Work was disrupted. Mortars and rockets came in every night now, almost all of them falling into the Green Zone's open spaces. One of the biggest rockets landed in the Palace parking lot and took out twenty-six cars, mostly SUVs. Many people camped in the Palace basement because they felt safer underground. Duck and cover: you couldn't get farther from Iraq and still be there. Americans were not running away, but as a collective they were certainly giving ground.

Something similar happened in Washington, D.C. The President's advisers realized that the occupation strategy had failed. Concerned that the ongoing debacle in Iraq could cost George W. Bush the 2004 election, suddenly only a year away, they exhibited fast reflexes and strong instincts for self-preservation. Duck and cover. Though this was vehemently denied, in the fall of 2003 responsibility for the occupation was eased away from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his Pentagon brain trust and placed in the hands of the White House staff—particularly National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice. Henceforth the big decisions were apparently driven not by ideology or geopolitical considerations but by domestic political calculation—including, no doubt, a cold assessment of journalistic dynamics and the American public's attention span. Gone was the presumption of a long-term occupation, the very basis of action at the CPA until that time. The idea now was to limit American casualties, or the perception of them, and to "accelerate" the handover of sovereignty to Iraq by the end of June—an adequate four months before the U.S. elections. Bremer's freedom of operation would not be restricted so much as radically lopped off; he could come home before the summer, cool down at his new house

in Vermont, and maybe write a book. Iraq would no longer be his problem, and by extension it would be less of the President's. The Green Zone would become an "embassy." And with Iraqi sovereignty would come some measure of Iraqi responsibility and blame.

Politically the plan worked remarkably well. To be sure, there were challenges along the way: the televised images in March of the mutilated corpses of four American contractors in Fallujah, and the political requirement to bear up and respond militarily; the frustrations of the resulting Marine Corps siege; the mutinies of the new Iraqi forces; the various episodes of sustained fighting ever since; the revelations of torture at Abu Ghraib; the difficulties of assembling an Iraqi government to which the mantle of power could be passed; the very need to return to the United Nations for help, and with smiles in the form of gritted teeth. But having gone through all that, by the end of this summer it was possible to see the slow fading of media coverage, and an important part of the American electorate turning away.

At the end of November of 2003 the Ramadan Offensive faded, and Iraq settled down for the winter months. Though the insurgents still fired mortars into the Green Zone, and continued to explode deadly car bombs in the city, the frequency of the attacks diminished. The residents began to move from their emergency quarters into the new trailers around the Palace, and to dance again at the Rashid. Life seemed almost normal, though "normal" still meant living in a state of siege.

Like the bombings in the city, the mortaring of the Green Zone occurred in distinct phases over time, whether in the mornings, or evenings, or late at night. Rockets were relatively rare. But the mortar attacks were so predictable at any given time that people working in the safety of the heavy-roofed Palace had office pools going on when the rounds would come in. The explosions were loud but brief and usually quite small, with destructive power that was concentrated, and therefore localized. Because of the presence of American helicopters on patrol overhead, the mortar rounds were not "walked" to targets by forward observers but fired hurriedly at the Green Zone in the blind. The insurgents pulled up on the Baghdad streets, sometimes in full view of Iraqi crowds; they set up their tubes, shot off maybe two or three mortar rounds, and then packed up and disappeared. A person in the Green Zone would have been extremely unlucky to get hit by one, and with the possible exceptions of a Gurkha guard and an Iraqi electrician, each rumored to have been killed, across the entire duration of the CPA no one knew of any civilian who had even been grazed.

By spring the trick was to avoid getting caught up in the Palace procedures. An attack would come banging in and quickly end. After a delay of several minutes—a silence mean-



ing that the danger was past—an alarm would go off, followed by a public-address system known as the Giant Voice, which said, “Take cover! Take cover!” The rules then required people to troop down into the basement, where they had to wait until some anonymous official could summon the bureaucratic courage to have the Giant Voice issue an “All clear!” This usually took about an hour. The rules were enforced by Marines who were supposed to keep an eye out for stragglers. At some of the busiest offices people responded to the sound of explosions not by fleeing but by locking their doors from the inside. The best thing about the Giant Voice, it was said, was that it often failed, leaving people at peace with the war. Reactions were the same at the residential trailers, which were enclosed by sandbagged walls but had thin metal roofs offering no protection from high-trajectory rounds. Huge culvert pipes and heavy concrete boxes had been laid on their sides nearby to serve as shelters, but they were not much used. On a few occasions explosives landed close enough to the trailers to knock fixtures from the ceilings, and this did arouse comment. Usually, however, when the mortars came in, people didn’t even bother to get up.

One of the real stars of the occupation was a soft-spoken and thoughtfully conservative young lawyer named Brett McGurk, now serving at the embassy, who had clerked for Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, and worked at the CPA directly under Paul Bremer, in a busy office that included the Australian Michael Kelly, among others. These people worked particularly hard—seven days a week, usually from early morning until late at night. McGurk told me that somehow they had gotten hold of a DVD of *The Cannonball Run*, an old comedy starring Burt Reynolds and Farrah Fawcett, which is said to have its charms. He said that for five months they joked about needing to sit down and watch this stupid thing, and finally one night they did.

A new man, recently arrived, was working in an adjoining room. McGurk said, “So we were watching *Cannonball Run* when four rockets hit. Boom boom boom boom. And the new guy stuck his head in and said, ‘I hear explosions!’ We turned and just looked at him. Like, ‘Dare you interrupt this movie?’” McGurk laughed. “He came back in the morning and said, ‘Did you guys find out where those rockets hit?’

“And it was, like, ‘No.’

“Then we went back to digesting *Cannonball Run*.”

This is a reality rarely conveyed to Americans back home. The American press in Baghdad reports on the Green Zone attacks minimally, without description or context, leaving readers to think in terms of World War II or Vietnam. Moreover, many staff members upon returning to the United States tend to indulge in innocent exaggerations about their lives on the front lines. Thus in local papers all through the nation the distinction between combat units and the CPA has been blurred, and it is the idea of sacrifice and risk that has emerged.

McGurk once described his frustration at trying to break through the public image for the sake of his family’s feelings during a recent quick trip back to Connecticut. He had found it difficult to convince his mother that he needed to extend his tour in Iraq to continue his work there, which he found extraordinarily interesting. She was terribly worried about his safety of course, and was tracking all the news reports. She knew right away, for instance, when a rocket had hit the Palace. McGurk recognized that he probably sounded either reckless or slightly warped by his months in Iraq when he pointed out that this had amounted to a superficial hit, hardly more than a scratch on the face of the building, and that no one had been injured. To me after he returned he said, “You try to explain, the Green Zone’s big, and a rocket, the odds of it landing on you are so slim. But you can’t explain it to someone who isn’t here, and doesn’t have the context.” His mother could not be reassured—what mother could? But McGurk’s assessment was right. He had no desire to get killed in Iraq, and he knew with reasonable certainty that he would not. He was doing good work, and learning a lot. Though he never said this to me, he was one of those in the Green Zone—the serious operators—who might have wished that others there would stop with their self-dramatizations. But they would not. Many were doing little there anyway except living an adventure in their minds. They were mirror warriors. They were shadowboxers.

One twist in the Green Zone’s culture is that even as the residents learned not to overreact to the inbound rounds, they grew increasingly fearful of the enemy that was firing them. By early spring violence in Iraq was again on the rise, and the force-protection rules for venturing out were ratcheted up further. The rules varied depending on nationality, employer, and branch of the CPA, and people were largely self-policed, but most residents took the restrictions as good advice: you were supposed to have a reason for going into Baghdad or beyond, and to travel only in multi-vehicle armored convoys with armed guards. In other words, you were supposed to mount an expedition. And why bother? A more prudent choice was to stay in the zone and require the Iraqis to come to you if for some rare reason you really needed to deal with them face-to-face.

But there was always a counterculture, too, made up of CPA rebels who were determined to maintain contact with Iraq, and who were willing to break the rules to do it. They simply got into cars, usually with a translator, and drove out through the gates to do their jobs. Such behavior was of course frowned on by the officialdom left behind. But the rebels tended to be strong-minded people doing practical work, and they kept at it despite the obvious dangers, for a very long time. Then, last March 9, three of them traveling together were killed.

The best known of the victims was an American woman named Fern Holland, age thirty-three, who worked for the

CPA as a lawyer specializing in women's rights. Holland was blonde, blue-eyed, and beautiful—and an answer to anyone who believes that the CPA hired only right-wingers. She was a devoted liberal, fiercely committed to improving the world, and quite typically altruistic and brave. Indeed, she had something of a missionary's zeal. In 2000 she had quit her law firm to join the Peace Corps, and had gone off to Namibia, where she had stayed for eighteen months, promoting women's rights. After a stint back in the United States to study international law, she had moved to the hellish lands of West Africa—Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone—where she had worked for a charity called the American Refugee Committee, investigating the sexual exploitation of women and children. She had arrived in Baghdad in the summer of 2003, and after a stint investigating mass graves, had begun to set up women's centers around the country. She was known for defying the CPA rules, for insisting on driving herself, unarmed and unguarded, in a small Korean-made sedan. She refused to wear Islamic dress, which would have made her less conspicuous on the road, and normally she did not even don a head scarf to cover her hair.

**Here was the state of mind:  
If the lovely Fern Holland could  
be at the receiving end of such  
homicidal rage, then imagine  
the greeting awaiting ordinary  
American men should they ever  
emerge from the Green Zone.**

On the day she was killed, she was traveling as usual with her Iraqi translator, another women's-rights advocate named Salwa Ourmaishi, age thirty-five, whose late sister had lived in Nebraska, and who had spent several months in the United States before returning home to Baghdad, just before the American invasion. The women picked up a third CPA employee in the city of Karbala, about fifty miles south of Baghdad. He was a former Marine named Robert Zangas, age forty-four, who had entered Iraq with the invasion, had left in September of 2003, and three months later had returned to Baghdad as a civilian to work in public affairs. In Karbala he had spent the day at one of Holland's centers, conducting a workshop on the concepts of a free press for aspiring women journalists. There was a police station across the street, where Holland and Ourmaishi were known. The trio set out for the city of Hillah, to the south, with Holland behind the wheel. The end was then near: at some point between Karbala and Hillah a group of men armed with AK-47s forced them off the road, and at close range gunned them down. Soon afterward four Karbala policemen and two

Iraqi civilians were identified as the killers, and arrested for the crimes—an allegation that the Karbala police denied. A few months later, during this summer's battles around Najaf, the accused men escaped (or were released) from the prison there, and of course they disappeared.

Within the CPA news of the slayings came as a shock. Soldiers and contractors had been killed during the occupation, as had Iraqi collaborators, but Holland and Zangas were the first (and ultimately only) American civilian CPA officials to die by hostile fire. There was a moralistic told-you-so quality to the reaction that followed, because of Holland's blatant disregard of the force-protection rules. But it was also admitted that the bulletproof glass of an armored car will shatter under the impact of a few closely spaced rifle rounds, and that the betrayal implicit in any sort of police attack poses special dangers even for armed convoys. More profoundly, the attack seemed to stem from terrifyingly alien minds: if the lovely and sensitive Fern Holland could be at the receiving end of such homicidal rage, then imagine the greeting awaiting ordinary American men should they ever show themselves beyond the Green Zone walls. The CPA recoiled once again, and took another step back from Iraq. Fern Holland's women's centers were turned over "early" to the Iraqis, which means in practical terms that they were probably doomed. Back in the Green Zone, many of the people who had been willing to go out and do their jobs decided henceforth just to put in their time. This was known in official language as complying with the force-protection measures. People pointed out that technically you could be fired if you did not.

But there was more to the story than that. A smart and energetic reporter for the *Chicago Tribune* named Amer Madhani was based in Baghdad at the time. Madhani had traveled extensively through the dangers of Iraq—unarmed, unguarded, in ratty old cars—and he knew that many apparently random attacks had hidden histories behind them. Now he drove down to Karbala and began to ask around. What he eventually discovered was that Holland and Ourmaishi, having dropped the ex-Marine Zangas off at the women's center that morning, had proceeded to a village where one of their "clients" lived. Madhani drove to the village. The client was an old woman with a farm, whose husband had left her years before, and who ever since had been bullied and ostracized by her neighbors. During the Saddam years a local Baath Party member had come onto her land and built a house. After the fall of the regime she had tried to get this man to leave, and he had refused. The judge and the mayor had taken his side. Ultimately Fern Holland had gotten involved, and having exhausted other means of persuasion, had arranged for a bulldozer to come in. On the morning of the last day of her life Holland had supervised the razing of the house.

Madhani wrote this up in a 3,000-word feature that was co-authored with staff reporters in the United States





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and published by the *Chicago Tribune* ten days after the attack. For lack of evidence, the article avoided asserting the existence of a definite link between the bulldozing and the murders, but that possibility was now clear. The U.S. investigators assigned to the case must have discovered it too, though they could not talk about their findings. But even after the *Tribune* report appeared, most residents of the Green Zone seemed not to have heard. One might think someone would have taken pains to spread the word, since even a potential motive beyond blind hatred and war might have helped to ease people's anxieties, and encourage continuing contact with Iraq. But there was a problem in the Green Zone with the lack of local news. People watched Fox and CNN for what they were worth, and they saw plenty of reporting from Iraq (offering many their only view of the country), but they suffered a nearly complete blackout from the Green Zone itself. What the residents needed was a good hometown paper, independent and pugnacious, an uncensored *Occupation News*. Instead they got *Stars and Stripes*. Even in internal communications simple information was guarded and compartmentalized, often for political reasons posing as "security," or for no reason at all. Real events were known to have happened, but their resolutions were never explained. For instance, when an Arab TV crew was arrested at a gate, had explosives really been found packed into the cameras, or had the dogs simply been reacting to the chemical traces of a battle legitimately covered? Or Fern Holland—is it true that she got into the middle of a land dispute? So tense and politicized was the CPA that it was considered bad form even to ask. Residents were left to contemplate innumerable plausible rumors that could not be verified and yet would not fade away. Had there been a firefight out by the crossed-swords monuments on Saddam's parade ground? Had there been a drive-by shooting? A bomb found in the convention center? In the Governing Council building? In the Palace itself? People lived in a fog, and could never be certain of what was happening around them. It was partly as a result that they were so easily spooked.

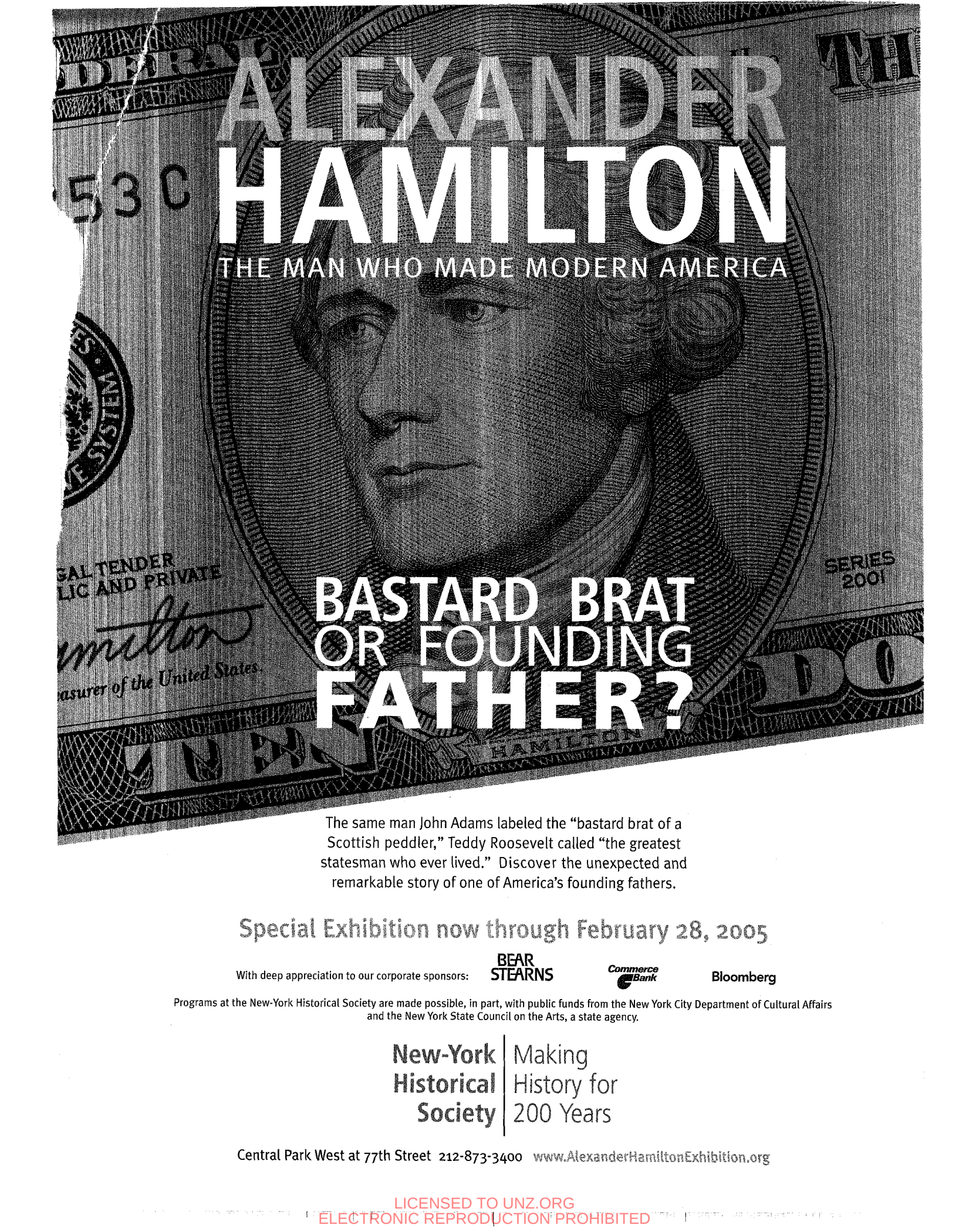
**T**he clearest example I know of occurred soon after Fern Holland was killed. Late one night behind the Palace an Army captain working for the CPA was returning to his trailer when he was stabbed in the face, neck, and torso. A guard heard the noise, and the assailant fled into the darkness. An internal alert was issued, rousing the entire Green Zone and causing a full-scale lockdown. The victim was taken to the hospital. Word went out that the assailant appeared to be an Iraqi—and by implication a terrorist. The Palace and the trailers were thoroughly searched, and over the next few days roving patrols of Gurkhas checked the grounds, and new lighting was installed throughout the trailer camps. People were urged to walk nowhere outside the Palace without escorts.

All this amounted to a big disruption of the sort merited only by genuine danger. It is also simply a rule of fortress life that infiltration is much to be feared. People therefore felt personally involved. Word eventually came down that the victim was stable, and that he would recover. But that was the end of it. The captain was never publicly named. He must have been flown out, because he was not seen again. More to the point, no further word was given about the Iraqi assailant. What did he look like, for instance? Had he come over the wall? Through a gate? From the slums on the inside? And how had he escaped? Or was there an Iraqi at all? Had the captain been drinking? Had there been a fight? Was there an old-fashioned love triangle involved? For all these questions the rumor mill provided answers, but tentatively. And this was not fun. Many people were too uncertain to concentrate much on the larger mission, whether it was running or rebuilding Iraq. Progressively through the spring, past June 28, when nominal Iraqi sovereignty came, and into the summer under the new embassy regime, the Green Zone kept seizing up with fear.

But there is an encouraging side, too: among the crowds of ineffectual officials, bureaucratic obstructionists, and delusional politicians rotating through the Palace, there were always a handful of smart and experienced people who were bearing up well, often despite their own misgivings, and they were carrying the CPA. For instance, there was a grandfatherly retiree who went daily into the city, quietly and alone, and helped to establish the first functional banks. There was a Coast Guard officer who came to Baghdad late, but rescued the CPA's Ministry of Transportation from its shambles, and got the southern ports in order. There was a motorcycle cop from Florida who did risky and effective work getting the Baghdad police back onto the streets. There was another American who strove to clear barricades and debris. There were people from the U.S. Department of Justice performing miracles to establish an independent Iraqi judiciary. There were crews out upgrading the national electric grid, despite attacks. There were civilian security men out taking fire and saving lives. There were others.

At the top of the pyramid, with good fortune for the United States, was the besieged legal team on which Brett McGurk and Michael Kelly worked. This was the Office of the General Counsel, headed by a U.S. Army lawyer named Scott Castle, who proved to be quite brilliant and capable. The office was dreaded within the CPA, because it blocked so many pet programs. The programs were blocked because they were illegal under international law, because they were inappropriate for a country like Iraq, or because the Iraqi Governing Council itself objected. They were all the well-intentioned Maryland traffic codes that had somehow passed through the Green Zone labyrinth and were inbound for Paul Bremer's signature. Because of the small-town character of the Green Zone, rejecting them was often awkward for the staff. At one point, for instance,





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an official originally from the U.S. Department of Labor submitted a proposed new Iraqi labor law that he seemed to have been working on for months: it was a wild document, ninety pages long, and full of such minutiae as requirements for specific companies, including staffing levels, the placement of doctors and nurses, and the management of breast-feeding breaks. How do you say to someone you live with that his work is that far out of touch? Word was sent through back channels, gently. In the end the law was whittled into a provision against child labor.

But the office was not just defensive in nature. Working under Scott Castle, and ultimately under Bremer himself, the lawyers there essentially drew up a new nation, helping to create a temporary constitution to serve as a practical structure for the soon to be sovereign government, working with the United Nations to shape the first election plans, and ultimately delivering a hundred basic laws, known somewhat unfortunately as "Orders," with which an Iraqi government could start to work. The Orders have been much criticized. They suffer from an ad hoc quality, the same lack of a coherent plan that has hindered America in Iraq from the start. Moreover, some of the Orders in the area of economic reform seem to have been driven by conservative zealotry, and are

**Among the crowds of ineffectual officials and delusional politicians rotating through the Palace, there were always a handful of smart and experienced people who were bearing up well, and they were carrying the CPA.**

of questionable legality anyway: despite resistance from London, which was reluctant to violate a clear ban on economic restructuring that is imposed by international occupation law, Washington and its then ally Ahmed Chalabi drove through the reforms on the basis of a UN resolution that after the American bombing campaign and invasion had called for economic reconstruction in Iraq, and the establishment of conditions necessary for growth and stability. Some of the Orders are also almost comically disconnected from the foreseeable realities of Iraq. The Copyright Order comes to mind, as does Order 81—the Patent, Industrial Design, Undisclosed Information, Integrated Circuits and Plant Variety law. But in those cases certainly no damage was done. And, quibbles aside, the Orders overall constituted serious and important work—certainly the best that the Green Zone has produced. They are the CPA's legacy, after fourteen months of a difficult occupation—a set of tools that might somehow be used by the Iraqis in the upcoming fight to stave off troubles worse than any yet seen.

The birth of the American-made Iraq, last June 28, was a striking experience for the American officials involved. Though Iraqi sovereignty was weak, and did not extend to control over U.S. officials or troops, it was immediate, and more real than cynics on the outside believed. The Green Zone, however, remained unchanged. One week later I went to a July 4 party at the pool on the Palace grounds. Chairs were arranged on a lawn. The evening was hot. There was food and drink, and an Army band played songs. A car bomb had exploded that afternoon in the central city, but it seemed long ago and far away. A video of fireworks played on a big screen, with the volume turned off. Everyone expected that mortars might come in, but for some reason none did. Helicopters patrolled overhead.

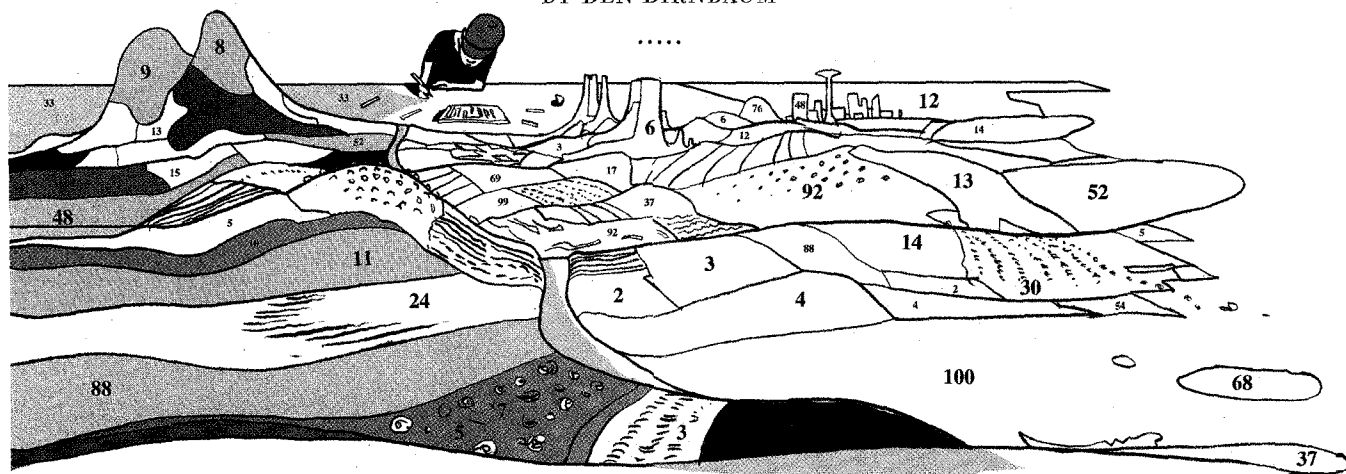
It was a strange time in the Green Zone. Paul Bremer was gone, and the Palace had become an embassy. Now the Green Zone was to be called the International Zone—a descriptive enough name, which in a year or two might actually stick. CPA employees had been shipping out for weeks, crossing paths with State Department strangers shipping in. About half of the old crowd was leaving. As a measure of the new one, it was said that men could be seen wearing ties in the Palace hallways. There was some hope at the time that an infusion of worldly diplomats might somehow loosen the Green Zone up and allow people to engage with Iraq. Months later now, in the fall, it has become clear that this was not to be—that the new regime is perhaps even more tense than the CPA, as U.S. elections approach and the fighting in Iraq surges.

In any case, at the July 4 party it was diverting to spot a few men wearing dark suits and good shoes. They kept together a little cautiously. But others were having a good time. There were hundreds in the crowd now, maybe more. Many wore a T-shirt of Uncle Sam saying "BRING IT ON!" Many were middle-aged and slightly overweight. Many were young. Some wore bush hats. I spotted surprisingly few guns. Some people jumped in and out of the pool, or lolled around in the water on children's floats and duckies, drinking beer. At some point the band played "God Bless America." Later a Green Zone choir stood in a little open-air pagoda and sang all four military service songs, for the Army, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Marines. You could see who was (or had been) in what service by those standing at attention, and maybe even getting a little emotional. I felt a twinge for the Coast Guard man, though I don't know if the Coast Guard has a song. By this time there was a lot of drinking going on. People began dancing on the lawn. Voices were loud. Slowly, as the night went on, the party got wild. I saw no Iraqis there at all. I walked through the crowd looking at the characters, wondering as I had before what this enterprise was all about. Everyone there would have had a different answer, based on background, motivation, and experience here on the ground. So maybe there was no answer at all. Maybe you just had to assert the obvious: that this was a war, that this was the Green Zone, and that this was America. ■



# CRAYOLA NATION

BY BEN BIRNBAUM



*"Thinking of the 2004 election as a matter of the old red states and blue states is a big mistake, and so is looking at our country that way."* —E. J. DIONNE JR., *The Washington Post*, August 20, 2004

**APRICOT:** Area code that does not contain a tow zone  
**BARK:** Site of a hair salon called Gay Blades  
**BIRCH:** Site of a hair salon called Dotty's Wash and Cut  
**BLUSH:** State in which the phrase "kasha varnishkes" has never been spoken except by accident  
**BURNT SIENNA:** Future site of Sonny Bono Museum  
**BUTTERY:** Dick Cheney hideout  
**CAMOUFLAGE:** Waitress named Lurleen  
**CERULEAN:** Computer disk that belongs to Los Alamos  
**CHEDDAR:** Place where Washington slept  
**CINNAMON:** Place where Wilt Chamberlain slept  
**CLARET:** Suburban garage in which no rock band has rehearsed  
**CORNFLOWER:** High school named for Jefferson Davis  
**DILL:** High school named for Angela Davis  
**ESPRESSO:** Street corner on which Prada handbags can be purchased for cash  
**FRENCH BLUE:** Okra-eaters cluster  
**GRANITE:** Roadside crate of zucchini for the taking  
**GRASSHOPPER:** Library named for George W. Bush  
**GUNBOLT:** High school named for Geena Davis  
**LAKE:** Zip code in which the words "Harold Bloom" have never been spoken except by accident  
**LEMON-LIME:** Significant private collection of *Star Trek* memorabilia  
**MELON:** Cellar with Pilates equipment in original carton on floor behind furnace  
**MIDNIGHT:** Cellar with Thighmaster in original carton on floor behind furnace

**MOSS:** Place that could be mistaken for Canada  
**PEACH:** Brooklyn  
**PERIWINKLE:** Site of final closeout Oriental-rug sale due to loss of lease  
**PESTO:** Year-round family-yard-sale cluster  
**PINEFOREST:** Courthouse with spittoons  
**PUMICE:** School district with elected commissioner who has seen Elvis recently  
**RAISIN:** School district with elected commissioner who has seen *The Seventh Seal* recently  
**RUST:** Prairie with no *Granta* subscribers  
**SALMON:** Jimmy Hoffa  
**SEAFOAM:** Man who does great impersonation of Ed Sullivan  
**SHALE:** Kosher Chinese restaurant  
**SHERBET:** Michael Jackson  
**SMOKE:** Annual Muskie Fishing and Arts Festival  
**STONEWASH:** Block on upper Broadway that has not appeared in *Law & Order* episode  
**TAUPE:** Stand of marijuana in woods behind high school named for Geena Davis  
**TEAL:** Lutheran parish hall in which the word "bootylicious" has never been spoken even by accident  
**THISTLE:** Rod McKuen Heritage Center  
**WALNUT:** Neighborhood with Starbucks that can be seen from sidewalk in front of another Starbucks  
**WATERMELON:** Front-yard-with-tireless-and-hoodless-cars cluster  
**WEDGWOOD:** Convenience store currently being robbed  
**WHISKEY:** Berkeley, California  
**WISTERIA:** On-schedule Amtrak train

*Ben Birnbaum is the editor of Boston College Magazine and the special assistant to the president of Boston College.*



*milestones in luxury*

- 1886 ○ The tuxedo makes its debut in New York City.
- 1893 ○ Kokichi Mikimoto successfully produces the first cultured pearl.
- 1924 ○ The Montblanc Meisterstück fountain pen is introduced.
- 1936 ○ Dom Pérignon champagne made available.
- 1956 ○ Frank Lloyd Wright
- 1968 ○

*milestones in transportation*

- 1869 ○ The Transcontinental Railroad is completed.
- 1892 ○ America's first gas-powered automobile is invented.
- 1903 ○ The first motorized airplane is flown at Kitty Hawk, NC.
- 1936 ○ The Queen Mary makes her maiden voyage.
- 1945 ○ Blind inventor Ralph Teetor
- 1964 ○

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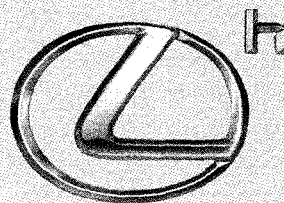


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# KARL ROVE IN A CORNER

*Karl Rove is at his most formidable when running close races, and his skills would be notable even if he used no extreme methods. But he does use them. His campaign history shows his willingness, when challenged, to employ savage tactics*

BY JOSHUA GREEN

*Illustration by Edward Sorel*

.....

It is the close races that establish the reputations of great political strategists, and few have ever been closer than the 2000 presidential election. From the tumult of the lengthy recount, the absentee-ballot dispute, the charges of voter fraud, and, ultimately, the Supreme Court decision, George W. Bush emerged victorious by a margin of 537 votes in Florida—enough to elevate him to the presidency, and his chief strategist, Karl Rove, to the status of legend.

But the 2000 election was not Rove's closest race. That had come earlier, and serves as a greater testament to his skill. In 1994 a group called the Business Council of Alabama appealed to Rove to help run a slate of Republican candidates for the state supreme court. This would not have seemed a plum assignment to most consultants. No Republican had been elected to that court in more than a century. But the council was hopeful, in large part because Rove had faced precisely this scenario in Texas several years before, and had managed to get elected, in rapid succession, a Republican chief justice and a number of associate justices, and was well on his way to turning an all-Democratic court all Republican. Rove took the job.

The most important candidate among the four he would run that year was a retired judge and Alabama institution by the name of Perry O. Hooper, of whom it is still fondly remarked that in the lean years before Rove arrived he practically constituted the state's Republican Party by himself. A courtly man with an ornery streak and a stately head of white hair, Hooper seemed typecast for the role of southern chief justice, a role he hoped to wrest from the popular Democratic incumbent, Ernest "Sonny" Hornsby.

At the time, judicial races in Alabama were customarily low-key affairs. "Campaigning" tended to entail little more than presenting one's qualifications at a meeting of the bar association, and because the state was so staunchly Democratic, sometimes not even that much was required. It was not uncommon for a judge to step down before the end of his term and handpick a successor, who then ran unopposed.

*Joshua Green is a senior editor of The Atlantic and a contributing editor of The Washington Monthly.*

All that changed in 1994. Rove brought to Alabama a formula, honed in Texas, for winning judicial races. It involved demonizing Democrats as pawns of the plaintiffs' bar and stoking populist resentment with tales of outrageous verdicts. At Rove's behest, Hooper and his fellow Republican candidates focused relentlessly on a single case involving an Alabama doctor from the richest part of the state who had sued BMW after discovering that, prior to delivery, his new car had been damaged by acid rain and repainted, diminishing its value. After a trial revealed this practice to be widespread, a jury slapped the automaker with \$4 million in punitive damages. "It was the poster-child case of outrageous verdicts," says Bill Smith, a political consultant who got his start working for Rove on these and other Alabama races. "Karl figured out the vocabulary on the BMW case and others like it that point out not just liberal behavior but outrageous decisions that make you mad as hell."

Throughout the summer the Republican candidates barnstormed the state, invoking the decision at every stop as an example of "jackpot justice" perpetuated by "wealthy personal-injury trial lawyers"—phrases developed by Rove that have since been widely adopted. To channel anger over such verdicts toward the incumbent Democratic justices, Rove highlighted their long-standing practice of soliciting campaign donations from trial lawyers—just as Republicans (which Rove did not say) solicit them from business interests. One particularly damaging ad run by the Hooper campaign was a fictionalized scene featuring a lawyer receiving an unwanted telephone solicitation from an unseen Chief Justice Hornsby, before whom, viewers were given to understand, the lawyer had a case pending. The ad, and the unseemly practices on which it was based, drew national attention from Tom Brokaw and NBC's *Nightly News*.

The attacks began to have the desired effect. Judicial races that no one had expected to be competitive suddenly narrowed, and media attention—especially to Hooper's race after the "dialing for dollars" ad—became widespread. Then Rove turned



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up the heat. "There was a whole barrage of negative attacks that came in the last two weeks of our campaign," says Joe Perkins, who managed Hornsby's campaign along with those of the other Democrats Rove was working against. "In our polling I sensed a movement and warned our clients."

Newspaper coverage on November 9, the morning after the election, focused on the Republican Fob James's upset of the Democratic Governor Jim Folsom. But another drama was rapidly unfolding. In the race for chief justice, which had been neck and neck the evening before, Hooper awoke to discover himself trailing by 698 votes. Throughout the day ballots trickled in from remote corners of the state, until at last an unofficial tally showed that Rove's client had lost—by 304 votes. Hornsby's campaign declared victory.

Rove had other plans, and immediately moved for a recount. "Karl called the next morning," says a former Rove staffer. "He said, 'We came real close. You guys did a great job. But now we really need to rally around Perry Hooper. We've got a real good shot at this, but we need to win over the people of Alabama.'" Rove explained how this was to be done. "Our role was to try to keep people motivated about Perry Hooper's election," the staffer continued, "and then to undermine the other side's support by casting them as liars, cheaters, stealers, immoral—all of that." (Rove did not respond to requests for an interview for this article.)

## **Rove's conduct is a subject of no small controversy in political circles. His reputation for winning is eclipsed only by his reputation for ruthlessness, and examples abound of his apparent willingness to cross moral and ethical lines.**

The campaign quickly obtained a restraining order to preserve the ballots. Then the tactical battle began. Rather than focus on a handful of Republican counties that might yield extra votes, Rove dispatched campaign staffers and hired investigators to every county to observe the counting and turn up evidence of fraud. In one county a probate judge was discovered to have erroneously excluded 100 votes for Hooper. Voting machines in two others had failed to count all the returns. Mindful of public opinion, according to staffers, the campaign spread tales of poll watchers threatened with arrest; probate judges locking themselves in their offices and refusing to admit campaign workers; votes being cast in absentia for comatose nursing-home patients; and Democrats caught in a cemetery writing down the names of the dead in order to put them on absentee ballots.

As the recount progressed, the margin continued to narrow. Three days after the election Hooper held a press conference to drive home the idea that the election was being stolen. He declared, "We have endured lies in this

campaign, but I'll be damned if I will accept outright thievery." The recount stretched on, and Hooper's campaign continued to chip away at Hornsby's lead. By November 21 one tally had it at nine votes.

The race came down to a dispute over absentee ballots. Hornsby's campaign fought to include approximately 2,000 late-arriving ballots that had been excluded because they weren't notarized or witnessed, as required by law. Also mindful of public relations, the Hornsby campaign brought forward a man who claimed that the absentee ballot of his son, overseas in the military, was in danger of being disallowed. The matter wound up in court. "The last marching order we had from Karl," says a former employee, "was 'Make sure you continue to talk this up. The only way we're going to be successful is if the Alabama public continues to care about it.'"

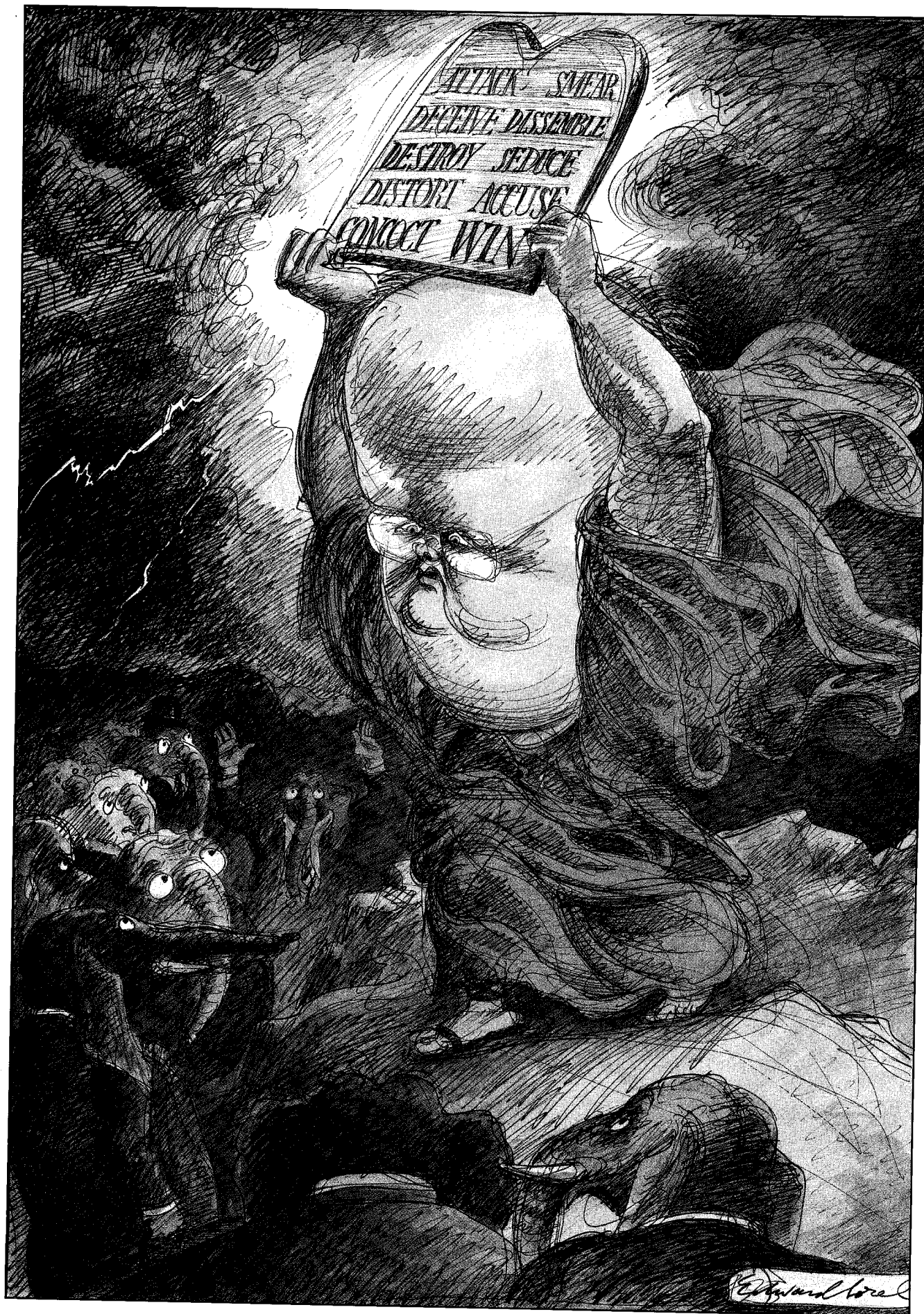
Initially, things looked grim for Hooper. A circuit-court judge ruled that the absentee ballots should be counted, reasoning that voters' intent was the issue, and that by merely signing them, those who had cast them had "substantially complied" with the law. Hooper's lawyers appealed to a federal court. By Thanksgiving his campaign believed he was ahead—but also believed that the disputed absentee ballots, from heavily Democratic counties, would cost him the election. The campaign went so far as to sue every probate judge, circuit clerk, and sheriff in the state, alleging discrimination. Hooper continued to hold rallies throughout it all. On his behalf the business community bought ads in newspapers across the state that said, "They steal elections they don't like." Public opinion began tilting toward him.

The recount stretched into the following year. On Inauguration Day both candidates appeared for the ceremonies. By March the all-Democratic Alabama

Supreme Court had ordered that the absentee ballots be counted. By April the matter was before the Eleventh Federal Circuit Court. The byzantine legal maneuvering continued for months. In mid-October a federal appeals-court judge finally ruled that the ballots could not be counted, and ordered the secretary of state to certify Hooper as the winner—only to have Hornsby's legal team appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, which temporarily stayed the case. By now the recount had dragged on for almost a year.

When I went to visit Hooper, not long ago, we sat in the parlor of his Montgomery home as he described the denouement of Karl Rove's closest race. "On the afternoon of October the nineteenth," Hooper recalled, "I was in the back yard planting five hundred pink sweet Williams in my wife's garden, and she hollered out the back door, 'Your secretary just called—the Supreme Court just made a ruling that you're the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court!'" In the final tally he had prevailed by just 262 votes. Hooper smiled broadly and handed me a large photo of his







swearing-in ceremony the next day. "That Karl Rove was a very impressive fellow," he said.

In the decade since, the recount and the court battle have faded into obscurity, save for one brief period, late in 2000, when they suddenly became relevant again. Almost as if to remind Al Gore's campaign of Rove's skill when faced with a recount, the case was revived in a flurry of legal briefs in the Supreme Court case of *Bush v. Gore*—including one filed by the State of Alabama on behalf of George W. Bush.

This summer, with the presidential race looking as if it would be every bit as close as the one in 2000, I spent several months examining the narrowest races in Karl Rove's career to better understand the tendencies and tactics of the man who will arguably have more influence than anyone else over how this election unfolds. Rove has already generated a remarkable body of literature, including several notable books and numerous magazine and newspaper articles. I spoke to many of Rove's former candidates and their opponents; to his past and present colleagues and the people who faced off against them; and to political insiders and journalists—primarily in Texas and Alabama, where Rove has done the majority of his campaign work. I learned much about Rove that hasn't made it into the public sphere.

One of the striking things about his record is how few close races Rove has been involved with—primarily because he usually wins in a walk. In the relatively rare instances when he is in a tight race, he tends to win that, too. Although Rove first rose to political prominence as a specialist in direct-mail fundraising (and worked on hundreds of races in that capacity), mail is only one facet of a campaign, and rarely the deciding factor. So I focused on races in which Rove was the primary strategist, and therefore in a position at least roughly analogous to the one he holds in this presidential race. The last strategist before Rove to win a Republican presidential election was his former colleague Lee Atwater, who by the time of the 1988 campaign had a career record of 28–4. To my knowledge, no one has calculated such a figure for Rove. As far as I can determine, in races he has run for statewide or national office or Congress, starting in 1986, Rove's career record is a truly impressive 34–7.

The mythologizing portrayals of a "boy genius" that characterized so much media coverage of Rove after 2000, and especially after the Republicans' triumphant sweep in the midterm elections, struck me as sorely out of date when I began this project. The Bush Administration was suffering through the worst of the fallout from the Abu Ghraib scandal, and the President's approval ratings were plummeting. Clearly, there are many differences between the circumstances in which Rove has been victorious in the past and those he faces now. But that is no reason to discount his record. By any standard he is an extremely tal-

ented political strategist whose skill at understanding how to run campaigns and motivate voters would be impressive even if he used no extreme tactics. But he does use them. Anyone who takes an honest look at his history will come away awed by Rove's power, when challenged, to draw on an animal ferocity that far exceeds the chest-thumping bravado common to professional political operatives. Having studied what happens when Karl Rove is cornered, I came away with two overriding impressions. One was a new appreciation for his mastery of campaigning. The other was astonishment at the degree to which, despite all that's been written about him, Rove's fiercest tendencies have been elided in national media coverage.

Democrats who want to feel sanguine about the coming election might well find comfort in the particulars of Rove's career. Several of his usual advantages are lacking this time around, conspicuously in geography. As a direct-mail consultant, Rove worked for races across the country, in blue states as well as red. The nature of that work mostly entailed identifying conservatives and motivating them to donate money—a fine skill for one in his current position as Bush's chief strategist, but not the equivalent of running a campaign. Rove compiled his stellar record in Texas and Alabama—and, of course, in the 2000 presidential election, even if his candidate lost the popular vote. During the period in which he rose to power, both states, deeply conservative, were transitioning from a firmly Democratic electorate to a firmly Republican one. A charge frequently levied against Rove by beleaguered Democratic consultants in Texas and Alabama is that he merely "surfed the wave" of the demographic change. This ignores his political talent. It's true, though, that for most of his career Rove has enjoyed a kind of home-field advantage, and in this election he does not.

A surprising number of Rove's former colleagues believe that his unprecedented success in Texas, where for years his candidates rarely faced serious challenges, has fostered what in the boxing world would be known as a "tomato-can" syndrome. Like a heavyweight champion who lets down his guard after beating up a series of hapless "tomato-can" opponents, Rove, they fear, may have been blinded to current national realities by hubris. "I think Karl's success in Texas is almost a hindrance," a veteran strategist who worked with him in that state told me. "The rest of the country doesn't emulate Texas in terms of voting behavior. But sometimes you see his southern roots in Texas and his experience in Alabama kind of overtake him, and he seems to think the United States is one big-ass Texas."

Several consultants pointed to the issue of gay marriage, which one described as a perfect Texas wedge issue because it would attract culturally conservative Democrats in the eastern part of the state—"the rednecks," as he put it—who are normally the key to winning statewide office. But he



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doubted that the issue would have the same effect in the less conservative battleground states that are expected to decide this election.

Rove is also riding on less of a decisive financial advantage than the one he normally enjoys. In their book *Bush's Brain*, James Moore and Wayne Slater explain how Rove's success as a fundraiser provided the impetus for his move into political consulting, and how, once established in that capacity, he consolidated his power by controlling candidates' access to major donors, usually ensuring that his clients were better funded than their opponents. This enabled him to engage in what amounted to asymmetric warfare against anyone who challenged his candidates. The authors recount an anecdote in which Priscilla Owen—then a Houston judge, later a controversial Bush appointee to the federal bench—approached a rich Republican donor whose job it was to vet candidates, and explained that she was thinking about running for the Texas Supreme Court. "Have you talked to Karl Rove?" he inquired. Taking the hint, she replied, "No, but I plan to." After Rove agreed to support her, she won handily, outspending her opponent. A similar imbalance applied in 2000, when Bush outspent Gore by a wide margin. But this year John Kerry's extraordinary and unexpected ability to raise money has largely closed the gap.

## **I came away with a new appreciation for Rove's mastery of campaigning, and with astonishment at the degree to which Rove's fiercest tendencies have been elided in national media coverage.**

It will come as no surprise to anyone who has paid attention to the current campaign that Rove's most notable tendency in close races has been to go negative against his opponent, early and often. One of the first highlights of his career was the famously tight 1986 Texas governor's race, in which his candidate and mentor, the Republican oilman Bill Clements, sought to oust the Democratic incumbent Mark White. The race is legendary in Texas political lore for Rove's discovery that his office was bugged—news of which, coincidentally or not, distracted attention from an evening debate in which his candidate was expected to fare poorly. More pertinent to the current campaign is a strategy memo Rove wrote for his client prior to the race, which is now filed among Clements's papers in the Texas A&M University library. Quoting Napoleon, the memo says, "The whole art of war consists in a well-reasoned and extremely circumspect defensive, followed by rapid and audacious attack."

Though it is forever fashionable to denounce negative campaigning, every political expert understands that it can be extremely effective. Rove's career has borne this out perhaps better than any other modern political consultant's.

But his very success leaves him precariously positioned if Bush stalls or founders. Once a negative course is set, it is nearly impossible to change; the perpetrator is usually stained for good. Furthermore, Rove's method is to plot out elaborate strategies well in advance of the campaign, and stick to them vigilantly. John Deardourff, Rove's media consultant for races in Texas and Alabama, says, "This rap Bush has of never changing his mind and never admitting a mistake—that's Karl! That's where it comes from." It is a tribute to Rove's strategic skill that he is so often right.

Throughout his career Rove has been able to stage-manage races to an extraordinary degree. This is possibly his least appreciated skill. The most revealing time in his career was 1994, when Rove fought more close races than in any other year, and managed to dictate the dynamic in every one of them. He pulled off highly unlikely upsets for Perry Hooper in Alabama (a race overwhelmingly about trial lawyer excesses) and George W. Bush in Texas (a race dominated by Bush's platform of welfare, juvenile-justice, tort, and public-school reform). However impressive, all but one of his races have been conducted at the state level, and thus have been comparatively insular affairs, unimpeded by the glare of the national media or a troublesome global issue like violence in Iraq—both of which could threaten Rove's ability to control this race.

In the rare instances when he has failed to set the terms of debate, Rove hasn't fared nearly so well. Four years ago, in a race to succeed Hooper, who was retiring as Alabama's chief justice, Rove lined up support from a majority of the state's important Republicans behind his

candidate, an associate justice named Harold See. Like most of Rove's clients, See had an enormous financial advantage and ran a brutally negative campaign—but he was nonetheless trounced by Roy Moore, the "Ten Commandments" judge, who succeeded in making the race about religion. This loss may have helped Rove to recognize the power of religion as a political motivator: from the question of gay marriage to organizing churches for Bush, it features prominently in his playbook for the current election.

If there is any compelling reason to think that Rove may be out of his depth in this election, it is an odd lacuna in his storied career: no one I spoke with could recall his ever having to run an incumbent in a tough re-election race. This is partly a by-product of his dominance. Rove's power in Texas was such that he could essentially hand-pick his candidates, and once elected, they rarely lost. And he spent most of his career in the favorable terrain of the Deep South. One reason Rove was spared re-election fights is that as demographic changes swept across the South, and Republicans in Texas and Alabama began displacing Democrats, the likelihood that a Democrat could depose a

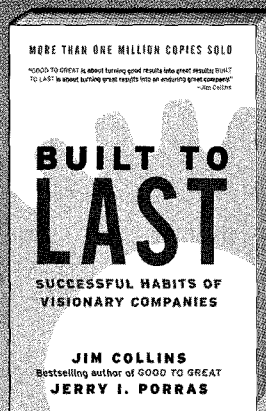


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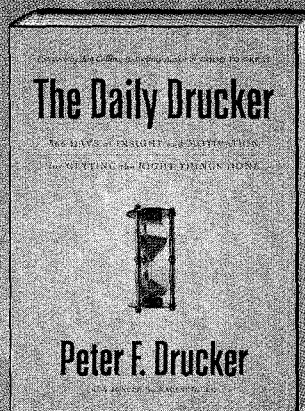
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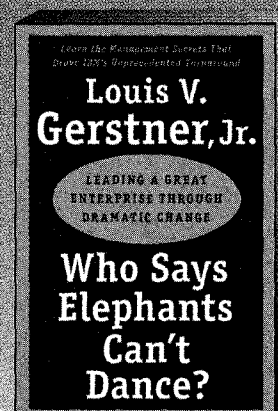
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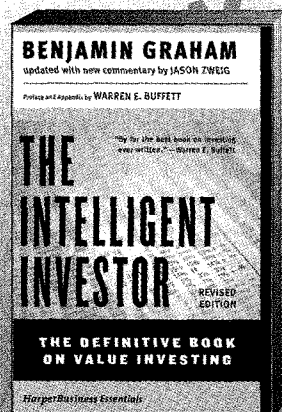
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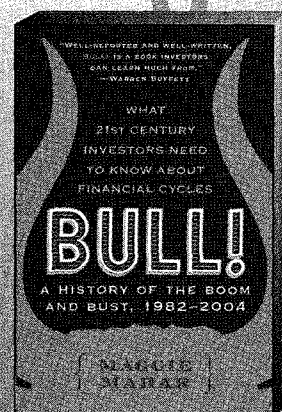
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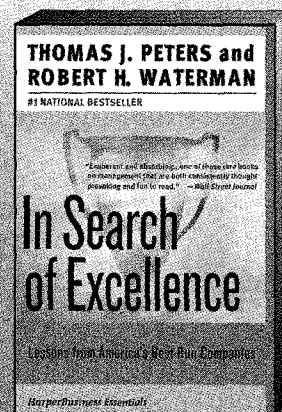
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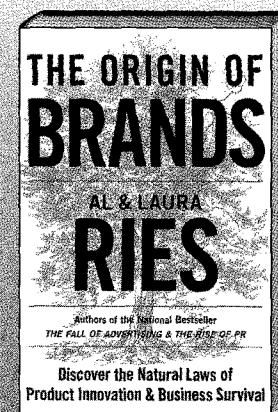
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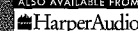
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sitting Republican became remote. Rove has long excelled at knocking off incumbents in tight races. Now, at last, he must defend one.

Despite all this, there are significant reasons to believe that Rove can pull it off this time. One is his prior experience in close races. Another is his preparedness and attention to detail, to which any discussion with a longtime Rove colleague invariably turns. "The thing that was most important to him was the mechanics: making certain that the campaign could block and tackle," recalls a staffer who worked for Rove's direct-mail firm in the 1980s and 1990s. Rove would typically begin a race by constructing seven-layer spreadsheets of the electoral history of a particular office, charting where votes for each candidate had originated and which groups had supplied them. In the 1980s these data led Rove to conclude that his candidates ought to target "ticket-splitters"—Texans who supported Ronald Reagan for President but voted Democratic in downballot races.

Rove's direct-mail experience had provided him with a nuanced understanding of precisely what motivates ticket-splitters. According to Karl Rove & Co. data on the 1994 Texas governor's race, Rove was aware, for instance, that households that received a single piece of mail turned out for Bush at a rate of 15.45 percent, and those that received three pieces at a rate of 50.83 percent. Turnout peaked at seven pieces (57.88 percent), after which enthusiasm for Bush presumably gave way to feelings of inundation, and support began to drop.

Rove's thirst for efficient advantage extended even to marketing. According to a former employee, rather than use costly dinners and Dallas Cowboys tickets to draw clients' attention, as other consultants did, Rove affixed antique stamps (though not valuable ones) to the weekly financial summaries he mailed to clients; he would send workers to estate sales to hunt out supplies.

When Rove arrived in Alabama, in 1994, his clients were initially puzzled as to why he was having them campaign in rural and less populated parts of the state rather than the urban areas they were accustomed to. It turned out that he had run an electoral regression analysis on each of the state's sixty-seven counties, and for efficiency's sake he put his four judicial candidates together on a bus trip to the counties with the highest percentage of ticket-splitters. "Karl got us focused on the fact that it was a matter of convincing Democratic voters who were already conservative to vote for Republican candidates," Mark Montiel, a candidate on the trip, explains, "because that was who best expressed their views."

Among Rove's other innovations was a savvy use of language, developed for speaking to the conservative base about judicial races. Candidates were to attack "liberal activist judges" and to present themselves as "people who

will strictly interpret the law and not rewrite it from the bench." A former Rove staffer explained to me that the term "activist judges" motivates all sorts of people for very different reasons. If you're a religious conservative, he said, it means judges who established abortion rights or who interpret Massachusetts's equal-protection clause as applying to gays. If you're a business conservative, it means those who allow exorbitant jury awards. And in Alabama especially, the term conjures up those who forced integration. "The attraction of calling yourself a 'strict constructionist,'" as Rove's candidates did, this staffer explained, "is that you can attract business conservatives, social conservatives, and moderates who simply want a reasonable standard of justice."

As with direct mail, Rove was skilled at reaching specific voter segments with television commercials, buying air time only during programs that he believed would attract the audience he was trying to reach. In his Alabama races he was known particularly to withhold advertising from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and similar afternoon programming—"trimming a media buy," as it is known in the trade. Bill Smith, who worked on a series of close races with Rove in Alabama, says, "There's a real overlap in what he specialized in professionally and what you need to do in a tight race." Whether he is seeking donors in a direct-mail fundraising campaign or manipulating a particular demographic sliver to win a close race, Rove's professional goal has been strikingly consistent: to reach the right people.

How Rove has conducted himself while winning campaigns is a subject of no small controversy in political circles. It is frequently said of him, in hushed tones when political folks are doing the talking, that he leaves a trail of damage in his wake—a reference to the substantial number of people who have been hurt, politically and personally, through their encounters with him. Rove's reputation for winning is eclipsed only by his reputation for ruthlessness, and examples abound of his apparent willingness to cross moral and ethical lines.

In the opening pages of *Bush's Brain*, Wayne Slater describes an encounter with Rove while covering the 2000 campaign for the *Dallas Morning News*. Slater had written an article for that day's paper detailing Rove's history of dirty tricks, including a 1973 conference he had organized for young Republicans on how to orchestrate them. Rove was furious. "You're trying to ruin me!" Slater recalls him shouting. The anecdote points up one of the paradoxes of Rove's career. Articles like Slater's are surprisingly few, yet as I interviewed people who knew Rove, they brought up examples of unscrupulous tactics—some of them breathtaking—as a matter of course.

A typical instance occurred in the hard-fought 1996 race for a seat on the Alabama Supreme Court between Rove's client, Harold See, then a University of Alabama law professor,



and the Democratic incumbent, Kenneth Ingram. According to someone who worked for him, Rove, dissatisfied with the campaign's progress, had flyers printed up—absent any trace of who was behind them—viciously attacking See and his family. “We were trying to craft a message to reach some of the blue-collar, lower-middle-class people,” the staffer says. “You’d roll it up, put a rubber band around it, and paperboy it at houses late at night. I was told, ‘Do not hand it to anybody, do not tell anybody who you’re with, and if you can, borrow a car that doesn’t have your tags.’ So I borrowed a buddy’s car [and drove] down the middle of the street ... I had Hefty bags stuffed full of these rolled-up pamphlets, and I’d cruise the designated neighborhoods, throwing these things out with both hands and literally driving with my knees.” The ploy left Rove’s opponent at a loss. Ingram’s staff realized that it would be fruitless to try to persuade the public that the See campaign was attacking its own candidate in order

“to create a backlash against the Democrat,” as Joe Perkins, who worked for Ingram, put it to me. Presumably the public would believe that Democrats were spreading terrible rumors about See and his family. “They just beat you down to your knees,” Ingram said of being on the receiving end of Rove’s attacks. See won the race.

Some of Rove’s darker tactics cut even closer to the bone. One constant throughout his career is the prevalence of whisper campaigns against opponents. The 2000 primary campaign, for example, featured a widely disseminated rumor that John McCain, tortured as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, had betrayed his country under interrogation and been rendered mentally unfit for office. More often a Rove campaign questions an opponent’s sexual orientation. Bush’s 1994 race against Ann Richards featured a rumor that she was a lesbian, along with a rare instance of such a tactic’s making it into the public record—when a regional chairman of the Bush campaign allowed himself, perhaps inadvertently, to be quoted criticizing Richards for “appointing avowed homosexual activists” to state jobs.

Another example of Rove’s methods involves a former ally of Rove’s from Texas, John Weaver, who, coincidentally, managed McCain’s bid in 2000. Many Republican operatives in Texas tell the story of another close race of sorts: a competition in the 1980s to become the dominant Republican consultant in Texas. In 1986 Weaver and Rove both worked on Bill Clements’s successful campaign for governor, after which Weaver was named executive director of the state Republican Party. Both were emerging as leading consultants, but Weaver’s star seemed to be rising faster. The details vary slightly according to which insider tells the story, but the main point is always the same: after Weaver went

into business for himself and lured away one of Rove’s top employees, Rove spread a rumor that Weaver had made a pass at a young man at a state Republican function. Weaver won’t reply to the smear, but those close to him told me of their outrage at the nearly two-decades-old lie. Weaver was first made unwelcome in some Texas Republican circles, and eventually, following McCain’s 2000 campaign, he left the Republican Party altogether. He has continued an active and successful career as a political consultant—in Texas and Alabama, among other states—and is currently working for McCain as a Democrat.

But no other example of Rove’s extreme tactics that I encountered quite compares to what occurred during another 1994 judicial campaign in Alabama. In that year Harold See first ran for the supreme court, becoming the rare Rove client to lose a close race. His opponent, Mark Kennedy, an incumbent Democratic justice and, as George Wallace’s son-

**“What Rove does,” says Joe Perkins, who managed the campaign of an incumbent Democratic justice in Alabama, “is try to make something so bad for a family that the candidate will not subject the family to that hardship.”**

in-law, a member in good standing of Alabama’s first family of politics, was no stranger to hardball politics. “The Wallace family history and what they all went through, that’s pretty rough politics,” says Joe Perkins, who managed Kennedy’s campaign. “But it was a whole new dimension with Rove.”

This August, I had lunch with Kennedy near his office in Montgomery. I had hoped to discuss how it was that he had beaten one of the savviest political strategists in modern history, and I expected to hear more of the raucous campaign tales that are a staple of Alabama politics. Neither Kennedy nor our meeting was anything like what I had anticipated. A small man, impeccably dressed and well-mannered, Kennedy appeared to derive little satisfaction from having beaten Rove. In fact, he seemed shaken, even ten years later. He quietly explained how Rove’s arrival had poisoned the judicial climate by putting politics above matters of law and justice—“collateral damage,” he called it, from the win-at-all-costs attitude that now prevails in judicial races.

He talked about the viciousness of the “slash-and-burn” campaign, and how Rove appealed to the worst elements of human nature. “People vote in Alabama for two reasons,” Kennedy told me. “Anger and fear. It’s a state that votes against somebody rather than for them. Rove understood how to put his finger right on the trigger point.” Kennedy seemed most bothered by the personal nature of the attacks, which, in addition to the usual anti-trial-lawyer litany, had included charges that he was mingling campaign funds with those of a nonprofit children’s foundation he was

involved with. In the end he eked out a victory by less than one percentage point.

Kennedy leaned forward and said, "After the race my wife, Peggy, was at the supermarket checkout line. She picked up a copy of *Reader's Digest* and nearly collapsed on her watermelon. She called me and said, 'Sit down. You're not going to believe this.'" Her husband was featured in an article on "America's worst judges." Kennedy attributed this to Rove's attacks.

When his term on the court ended, he chose not to run for re-election. I later learned another reason why. Kennedy had spent years on the bench as a juvenile and family-court judge, during which time he had developed a strong interest in aiding abused children. In the early 1980s he had helped to start the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama, and he later established the Corporate Foundation for Children, a private, nonprofit organization. At the time of the race he had just served a term as president of the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect. One of Rove's signature tactics is to attack an opponent on the very front that seems unassailable. Kennedy was no exception.

Some of Kennedy's campaign commercials touted his volunteer work, including one that showed him holding hands with children. "We were trying to counter the positives from that ad," a former Rove staffer told me, explaining that some within the See camp initiated a whisper campaign that Kennedy was a pedophile. "It was our standard practice to use the University of Alabama Law School to disseminate whisper-campaign information," the staffer went on. "That was a major device we used for the transmission of this stuff. The students at the law school are from all over the state, and that's one of the ways that Karl got the information out—he knew the law students would take it back to their home towns and it would get out." This would create the impression that the lie was in fact common knowledge across the state. "What Rove does," says Joe Perkins, "is try to make something so bad for a family that the candidate will not subject the family to the hardship. Mark is not your typical Alabama macho, beer-drinkin', tobacco-chewin', pickup-drivin' kind of guy. He is a small, well-groomed, well-educated family man, and what they tried to do was make him look like a homosexual pedophile. That was really, really hard to take."

Earlier this year the lone Democrat on the Alabama Supreme Court announced his retirement. There's an excellent chance that on Election Day the court will at last become entirely Republican.

**A**lmost from the beginning Karl Rove has signaled that he expects a close 2004 election, and he has run George W. Bush's re-election effort accordingly. While John Kerry's campaign has made an extraordinary effort to gather moderate voters to his liberal base by stressing its candidate's decorated war record and centrist views, Rove—in contrast to 2000's invitingly gauzy message of

"compassionate conservatism"—has returned to his traditional strength: motivating the base of conservative voters.

Bush's campaign has naturally focused on the battleground states, but Rove's strategy can be decoded by looking at the targets of emphasis within those states. They are predominantly solid Republican areas such as Pensacola, Florida, and Cincinnati, Ohio. Rove's gambit is to improve Bush's margins in places where the President fared well in the 2000 election, just enough—a few points higher among Catholics, evangelicals, Hispanics—to prevail once more. To achieve this he is following the lessons of tight races past, buying television time in solidly red Fargo, North Dakota, because the airwaves also reach the neighboring swing state of Minnesota, and in solidly blue Burlington, Vermont, so as to draw a few more voters to Bush in the battle for New Hampshire, next door.

Rather than soften Bush's appeal to reach moderates, Rove, as he has done throughout his career, is attempting to control the debate by expertly spotlighting issues sure to inspire his core constituency: the drive for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage, the pronouncements about love of country, the unrelenting attack against anything in an opponent that seems impregnable. All these tactics stand out in Rove's most memorable past victories.

Privately, Rove has been challenged and even denounced for his approach. A common refrain I heard from Republican consultants a few months ago was that his approach is foolish, because for the sake of an ideologically intense campaign, Rove is ceding to the Democrats the moderates Kerry is pursuing. And, these consultants fear, it puts Bush in jeopardy of seeing outside events decide the race.

But an interesting thing happened as I worked on this piece. Early in the summer, as Bush was struggling, even Rove's allies professed to doubt his ability to control the dynamics of the race in view of an unrelenting stream of bad news from Iraq. Several insisted that he was in over his head—with an emphasis that seemed to go deeper than mere professional envy. Yet by August, when attacks by the anti-Kerry group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth were dominating the front pages, such comments had become rarer. Then they died away entirely.

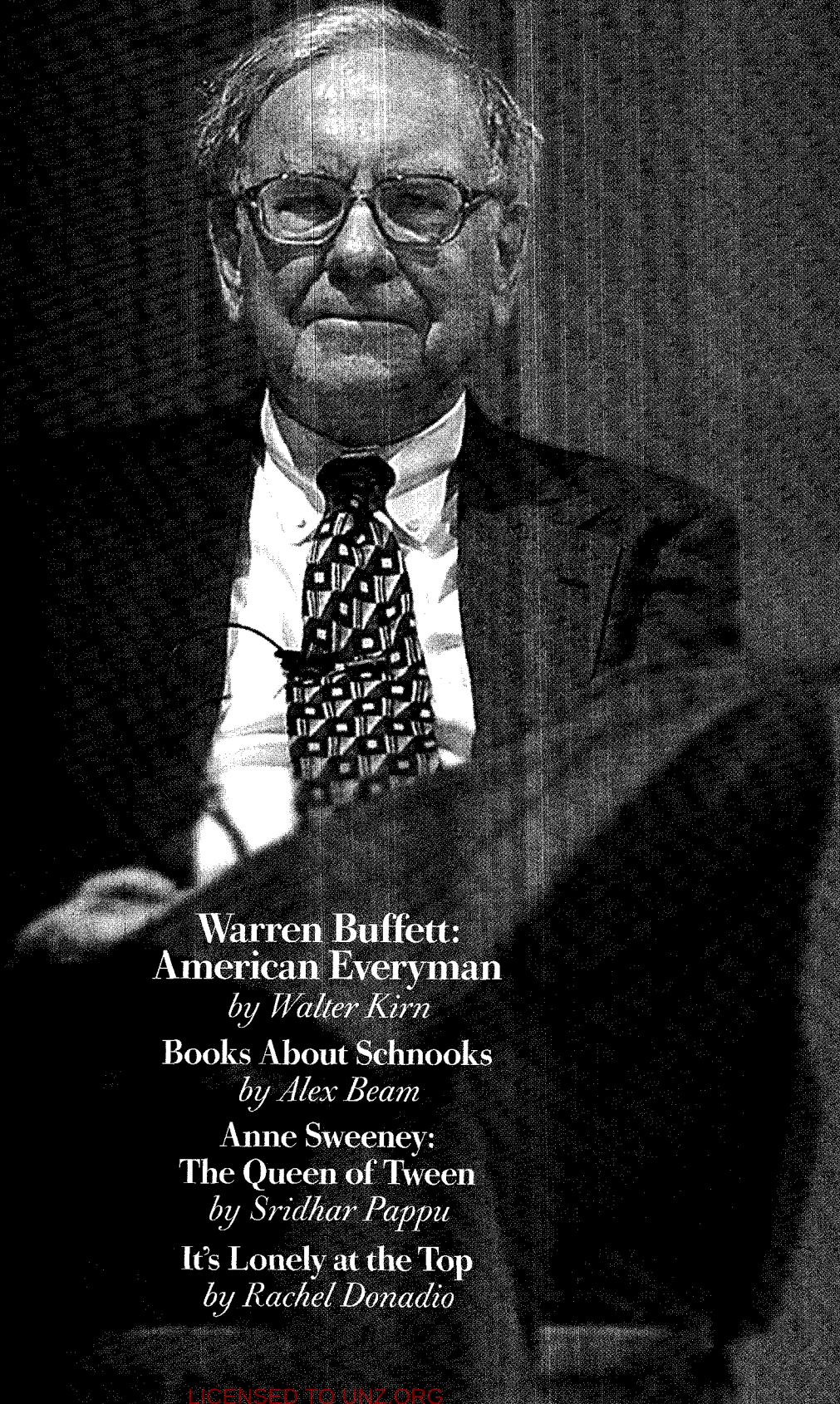
If this year stays true to past form, the campaign will get nastier in the closing weeks, and without anyone's quite registering it, Rove will be right back in his element. He seems to understand—indeed, to count on—the media's unwillingness or inability, whether from squeamishness, laziness, or professional caution, ever to give a full estimate of him or his work. It is ultimately not just Rove's skill but his character that allows him to perform on an entirely different plane. Along with remarkable strategic skills, he has both an understanding of the media's unstated self-limitations and a willingness to fight in territory where conscience forbids most others.

Rove isn't bracing for a close race. He's depending on it. ▀



THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

# THE BOARDROOM



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# American Everyman

*Warren Buffett's billions—and the oft told tale of how he made them—have become the least interesting thing about him. It's Buffett the symbol that matters now*

BY WALTER KIRN

On a Sunday afternoon in May of last year Warren Buffett, America's second richest man and, some feel, the greatest investor in its history, was meeting the press in an Omaha hotel when a dark-suited man—a bodyguard, apparently—hustled up onto the platform where Buffett was seated and whispered into his ear. The multi-billionaire listened without expression while the man in the seat beside him, Charlie Munger, the vice-chairman of their company, Berkshire Hathaway, stared ahead through a pair of horn-rimmed glasses whose lenses weren't merely thick but virtually spherical, like a pair of crystal Ping-Pong balls. Buffett and Munger are quite a duo, with the conversational timing and style of a vaudeville comedy team—Buffett dry and jovial and extroverted, and Munger even drier but blunt and mordant. For an hour or so, until this interruption, the two—both native Nebraskans—had been answering questions on everything from corporate-governance scandals to the likelihood that a major act of terrorism would bankrupt the insurance industry. It's their gift to be able to talk about such subjects so plainly, incisively, and honestly that the reporters had been laughing the whole time.

Now, though, it seemed that something dire was happening. The bodyguard looked concerned—a little panicky, even. When the guard left the platform, Buffett looked up and spoke. The hotel, he informed us, was advising everyone to take shelter immediately in a windowless safe room located in the center of the building: tornadoes had been sighted in western Omaha, and radar indicated that they were headed this way.

For his part, however, he intended to keep on taking questions until no one had anything more to ask or the whole building blew away. He sipped from a can of Cherry Coke and exchanged a look with his straight man Munger, whose myopic self-containment seemed impregnable. Moments later sirens started to wail. A few reporters scuttled out, but most of them took up Buffett's stoic challenge to ignore the warnings and carry on.

The reporters who had done their research knew that this was how Buffett always operates—not only in the face of violent winds but in the face of turbulent markets. He

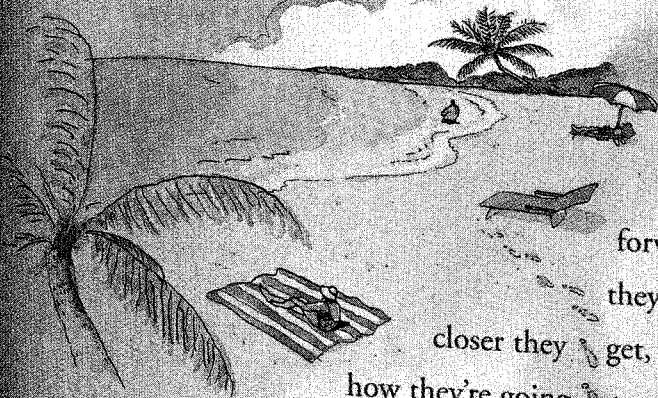
sits tight. He keeps his head while others are losing theirs, and then he moves in, if he wishes, and buys those heads (meaning large blocks of stock or entire companies) at an advantageous price. And then he keeps them. He rolls them into Berkshire Hathaway's almost comically diverse portfolio (the company's wholly owned properties, to list just a few, include a chocolate-candy retailer, an underwear manufacturer, a furniture store, a chain of ice-cream restaurants, a maker of cowboy boots, and an insurance firm that insures insurance firms) and watches his wealth, and that of his shareholders, grow and grow. He watches it grow while the fortunes of other investors—more-excitabile types with more-fashionable holdings, which they tend to think about selling the moment they buy them—rise and fall and gyrate and go sideways and eventually, in all too many cases, are ground down between the twin millstones of fear and greed.

The weekend of that stormy Sunday was dedicated to celebrating Buffett's success, or what the business writer Robert Hagstrom has called "the Warren Buffett way"—as though there were some sort of wizardry behind what may be the most thoroughly explained investment method in recent history. Every May, Buffett, Munger, and attending shareholders, whom the two like to refer to as "our partners," gather for Berkshire Hathaway's annual meeting: two hectic days of capitalist frolicking, featuring exhibition Scrabble games, hot-dog feeds, and shareholders-only sales at Borsheim's Jewelers and the Nebraska Furniture Mart, two of the company's retail properties. Though Buffett's personal thrift is the stuff of legend (he still lives in the fairly modest house that he bought in the 1950s), he isn't shy about encouraging shareholders to break out their credit cards for diamonds and carpets. At the end of the weekend he totals the receipts and makes the figures public.

The annual meeting's main event, which took place on a Saturday in 2003, is a freewheeling question-and-answer session with Buffett and Munger, held in a cavernous downtown sports arena. Among the thousands of adoring fans are scores of millionaires who owe their net worth to Berkshire's lofty stock price, which hit a three-year low on March 10, 2000, on the same day the NASDAQ reached its all-time high, and then reversed course while the NASDAQ sank and



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sank. In the 1990s highfliers derided Buffett for sitting out the run-up in high-tech and dot-com stocks (he once famously said that he simply “didn’t understand” them), but this contrarian feat provided sweet vindication.

The May 2003 session began with a short movie in which Buffett poked fun at his rumpled, down-home image while reminding the cheering audience of his unique celebrity—an unquantifiable but valuable asset that he has never been shy about exploiting but that financial writers tend to overlook when analyzing his character and accomplishments. In one segment Buffett appeared as Daddy Warbucks alongside Bob Kerrey, the former Nebraska senator and now the president of New School University, and belted out the song “Tomorrow,” from *Annie*. In another Ron Insana, a balding, huggable CNBC reporter, summarized Berkshire’s recent performance by cracking, “While the rest of the market was taking it in the shorts, Mr. Buffett was buying the shorts” (a reference to Berkshire’s acquisition of Fruit of the Loom). At one point the singer Jimmy Buffett, a distant relative of the tycoon’s, strummed a guitar and crooned, “I bought Berkshire back when it was cheap.” For the finale, CEOs from various Berkshire-owned companies put new words to a familiar Coca-Cola jingle: “It’s the real thing, Berkshire Hathaway. What the world wants today. Berkshire Hathaway.” When Buffett joined in at the close, and urged the audience members to sing along from their seats, they did so, heartily, swaying to the music and clapping in the dreamy, loose-wristed manner of old ladies feeling the spirit at a gospel service.

With its roster of grinning well-known faces letting Buffett upstage them at every turn (Tiger Woods made a cameo appearance too, pretending to coach Buffett on his creaky golf swing), the movie revealed at least as much about the so-called Oracle of Omaha as did his refusal to bow to the tornado warning. Buffett is a conscious, sophisticated performer, the inventor and caretaker of a rare persona that has no equivalent in American business. Not since Samuel Goldwyn, perhaps, has a tycoon functioned in the culture as both a first-class entertainer and the embodiment of his industry. Buffett’s Will Rogers folksiness and Mark Twain wit (“Never ask the barber if you need a haircut”; “Price is what you give; value is what you get”; “Predicting rain doesn’t count; building arks does”) aren’t merely colorful secondary traits but stylized expressions of his very being. They represent more than that, in fact. Buffett’s attitudes and mannerisms now stand for American capitalism itself—or at least for its more positive aspects. He is

what’s good about the free market, in human form—akin to what Joe DiMaggio was to baseball. Bill Gates may be richer, and Donald Trump (the anti-Buffett) flashier, but compared with Buffett they’re mere character actors. The role of the straight-shooting leading man, trusted by all, belongs to Buffett alone.

He understands this. Others know it too—particularly ambitious politicians in search of instant economic credentials and an air of humane financial probity. Not long after last year’s annual meeting, when more than 10,000 dazzled shareholders shot to their feet as Buffett finally took the microphone, and then hung on his every word for hours afterward, the financier was recruited by Arnold Schwarzenegger to advise his gubernatorial campaign on budget issues. It takes a leading man to know one, and although their relationship foundered over the question of property taxes (Buffett suggested that California raise them), Buffett’s decision to even be seen with Schwarzenegger solemnized the muscle man’s candidacy. This year John Kerry is looking for the same magic: he teamed up with

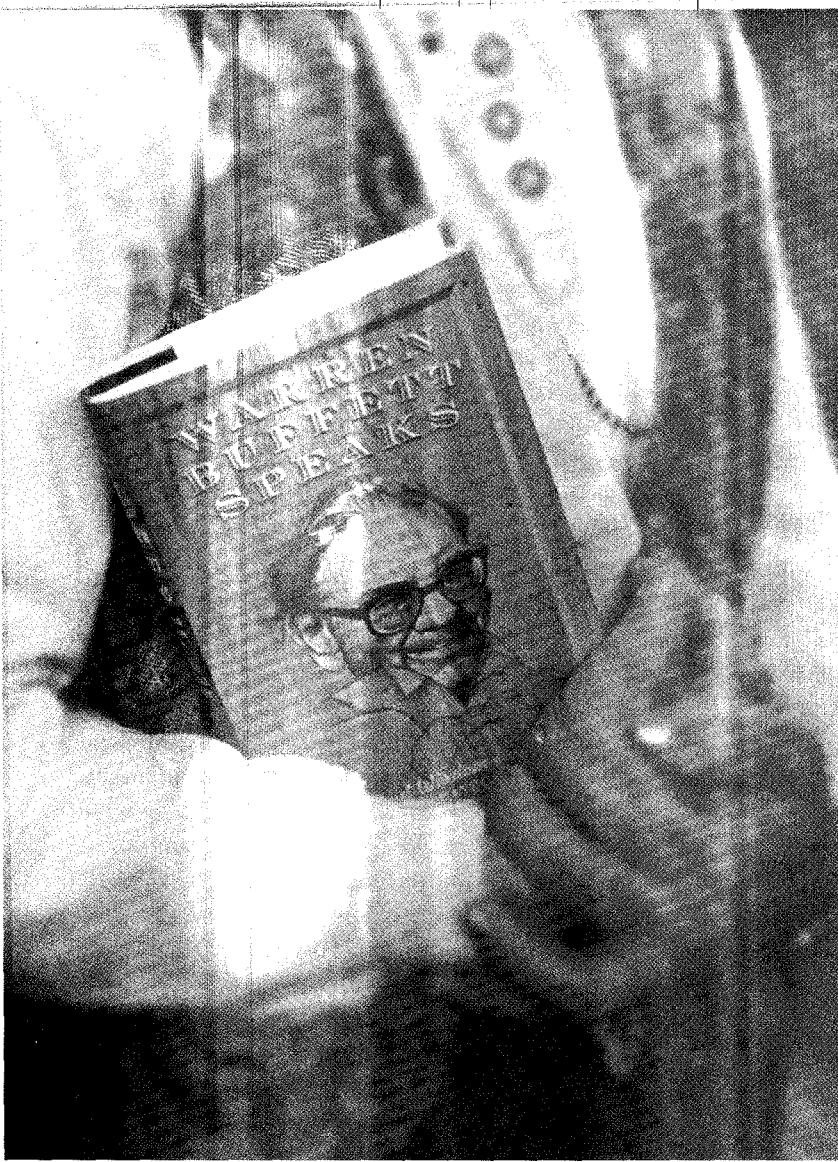
**Buffett’s “true” identity doesn’t really matter compared with the reputation he has created, and which the public has chosen to embrace, even idolize.**

Buffett early on, and will surely be dropping his name until Election Day.

All of which is to say that the popular business media have for some time now been missing the big story when it comes to the country’s second richest man. Buffett’s fortune—and the oft told tale of how he made it and continues to add to it—has become the least interesting thing about him. It’s Buffett the symbol that matters now, Buffett the folk hero, Buffett the communicator. As a successful investor, he merely moved markets; but as the charismatic, reassuring, quotable prototype of the honest capitalist (a sort of J. P. Morgan with a moral sense), he’s capable of influencing elections, galvanizing rock-concert-size crowds, and in general defining how we Americans feel about the system that underlies our wealth.

That Sunday afternoon in Omaha the system was sorely in need of a defender. The violent storm cells approaching from the west, whose dangers Buffett chose to ignore, were nothing compared with the financial cyclones whose winds could still be felt across the country. The Enron and WorldCom scandals, the NASDAQ crash, the post-9/11 recession,





and the run-up to the Iraq War had shaken the faith of millions. Buffett, Coke in hand, seemed sobered too. He spoke at length against the lax accounting standards that had enabled so much corporate fraud. He mocked the pseudoscientists of Wall Street who had led so many investors to believe that a market bubble can grow to infinite size. He made a persuasive statistical case, backed by his experience in the insurance world, for a future terrorist attack employing weapons of mass destruction. As usual, he spoke vividly and succinctly, cutting through complexities to the commonsense core of every issue and neither lightening harsh realities nor unduly darkening them. Buffett seemed ever mindful of the role he'd been cultivating for decades: the voice of playful, tempered reason. His most memorable line of the day was not his wittiest, but it typified his understated style, and resonated with authority—an authority derived partly from his investment record, but also from what deserves now to be viewed as his cultural, artistic record.

In response to a question about the prospects of a country beset by war and scandal, Buffett eyed his nearsighted sideman and said simply, as civil-defense sirens sounded in

the background and reporters readied their pens and notebooks, "We think America will do pretty well over time."

Pure Omaha poetry.

There is a line of self-made, iconoclastic, pragmatic, larger-than-life American Everymen that begins in the popular mind with Benjamin Franklin, and runs through Mark Twain, Will Rogers, and Harry Truman, but also shows up in such far-flung characters as Walt Whitman, Henry Ford, and Ernest Hemingway. They are the fresh-air paragons of democratic self-invention—the anti-phonies who tell it like it is and, with their grassroots words and ways, rebuke the pretentious sophistication of Europeanized elites. Even when they hold liberal political views, they sometimes come off as reactionary cornballs, because of the way they extend our native mythology of salty, slightly cranky individualism.

Warren Buffett, as much as anyone else alive right now, belongs to this indispensable tradition of truth-telling Americans so square and forthright that they end up seeming subversive. His "true" identity—the stuff about him that can be discovered by interviewing his family and associates or digging

through his garbage—doesn't really matter, finally, compared with the reputation he has created, and which the public has chosen to embrace, even idolize. This outward self is a literary artifact. It's a *book*, not a life. It cries out to be *read*.

The best way to start reading Warren Buffett is to gather up ten or twenty years' worth of his annual letters to Berkshire Hathaway shareholders (these "Chairman's letters" make up the bulk of the company's annual reports, and copies are available on the Internet), which may be the only documents of their type whose prose is worth poring over even for those who have no stake in the appended balance sheets. Buffett's choice of such a dreary medium as the primary showcase for his thoughts has always sent a message in itself. While the Trumps and Iacoccas of the world prefer to present themselves in garish books with jackets featuring large color photos of their own faces, Buffett, the legendary midwestern cheapskate with a knack for discovering hidden value in cookware clubs (The Pampered Chef) and encyclopedia publishers (World Book), has reclaimed a form of junk mail for his collected works.

Buffett's penny-pinching persona doesn't allow for lav-



ish photos or graphics; the reports are all text, and they're printed in black-and-white. They customarily open with a few sentences on the corporation's financial performance, which is almost always dazzling. Any other CEO would trumpet such numbers with eye-catching graphs, but Buffett tends, if anything, to play them down. Year after year, and especially in his best years, he warns the shareholders that Berkshire's results are not likely to be repeated. When they are repeated, which happens more often than not, he expresses no surprise, just gratitude, and then slips back into his chronic pessimism. In 1992, for example, after citing an increase in Berkshire's per-share book value of more than 20 percent, Buffett made a gloomy general market prediction that couldn't have been more wrong: "The return over the next decade from an investment in the S&P index will be far less than that of the past decade." He went on to remark that his firm's own rate of growth, which continued to be superb, had a perverse dark side: "The drag exerted by Berkshire's expanding capital base will substantially reduce our historical advantage relative to the index."

Such are the boring parts of the reports, composed in the dusty language of the business page. They do exhibit a certain buttoned-down wit, though. Like a multibillionaire Jack Benny, the thrifty Buffett just can't stop worrying. He can't stop finding the bad news in the good. Because we know how well he's done and how well he'll do, his nervousness is amusing and disarming. And by avoiding emotion in his expression at moments when others in his position would be euphoric, he also caricatures his well-known suspicion of moody reactions to short-term market swings. When things look up, he doesn't celebrate, and when things look down, he's not surprised—that's the pose, at least. The truth, we suspect, is that such a cautious outlook is a luxury of the financially untouchable, and that Buffett fully understands this. For himself he feels no anxiety at all—he only pretends to, out of compassion for us, the vulnerable public. The hidden message is a subtle one: I, who don't have to, am keeping my guard up as a way of reminding all of you that you can't afford to let yours down.

Such gestures betray an underlying arrogance. Biographers and magazine writers love to detail Buffett's austerity—his middle-class house, his bare-bones corporate headquarters, his decision to stay put in Omaha—but they make a mistake when they accuse him of modesty. In a man worth tens of billions of dollars, self-deprecation is a boast. When, after returning from a high-profile rescue mission at the scandal-plagued bond firm Salomon Brothers, Buffett joked in his 1992 report that Berkshire "didn't miss me while I was gone," he was complimenting himself for creating a company so successful, so replete with its founder's systems, methods, and attitudes, that it could beat the Street on autopilot.

Buffett's false modesty would be annoying if it weren't so clearly an act—an act meant to instruct rather than to deceive, and one that his followers are eager to learn from in the hope of getting rich themselves. By calling himself "your Chairman" in the reports, by endlessly dissecting his own investment mistakes even when they've done his firm no damage, and by constantly pointing up the unattractiveness of the stock that accounts for his stupendous \$40 billion net worth, Buffett is using a form of show-and-tell—exaggerated, dramatic, humorous—to teach lessons about humility, skepticism, and other qualities that he believes are crucial to profitable long-term investing. That is, he's playing the part of Warren Buffett, and a lot of the time he's hamming it up, one senses, in the spirit of Clemens playing Twain.

Once he has dispensed with reporting on Berkshire's performance, Buffett likes to spread out as a writer and indulge his flair for aphorism. "Fear is the foe of the faddist," he wrote in the 1994 report, "but the friend of the fundamentalist." This is the soul of the Buffett program: Stay cool. Exploit the follies of the crowd. It's the oldest investment advice there is, but Buffett has personalized it over the years by showing a certain contempt for the financial markets themselves, which he likes to portray as dens of waste and vanity rather than basically efficient systems for allotting capital. It's one of the reasons he's adored: he treats his shareholders as fellow members of a morally solid, wised-up in crowd surrounded by ethically wayward crazy people. It's us against them, the sane versus the mad, the prudent versus the greedy, and it's our right, perhaps even our duty, to grab the money from their trembling, sweaty hands. After all, left to their own unsound devices, they'd only fritter it away.

To be both an overlord and an underdog, an opportunist and a populist, is quite a trick, but Buffett manages to pull it off by implying that contemporary capitalism has fallen into a self-indulgent decadence that requires a puritan resistance movement led by the likes of Berkshire and its subsidiaries, whose CEOs he loves to praise as exemplars of uncorrupted, old-school enterprise. In 2002 he singled out the founder of The Pampered Chef, Doris Christopher, relating the Horatio Alger tale of how she parlayed \$3,000 she had borrowed against a life-insurance policy into a business with annual revenues of \$700 million, and fondly noting that Christopher had started her operation in her own basement. For Buffett, the ideal corporate leader is someone who grabs hold of his own bootstraps and never stops pulling up, no matter how far he rises.

Bracing stories of Buffett's clear-eyed managers stand in contrast to his chronic warnings about the dangerous soft-headedness of almost everyone else. "Nothing sedates rationality like large doses of effortless money," he observed in the



2000 report, in an essay on the difference between investment and speculation. With the S&P 500 down almost 10 percent for the year, after a prolonged bull run that Buffett had been mocked for missing out on, and with Berkshire showing a 6.5 percent gain, the time had come for the old man to gloat. His 1999 letter had predicted an imminent comeuppance for the markets, and payback had arrived as if on schedule. He shamed everyone involved, but especially the promoters of hyped-up tech stocks, whom he accused first of running a con game and then of suffering from a disease. "It was as if some virus, racing wildly among investment professionals as well as amateurs, induced hallucinations," he wrote.

Mental illness is one of Buffett's pet metaphors. (Indeed, his fixation on it makes one wonder if losing his own mind is his deepest fear.) Again and again in his letters he compares—by implication, at least—his own stability with the manic-depression displayed by Wall Street, which Buffett and his mentor Benjamin Graham, of Columbia University—the author of *The Intelligent Investor*, the classic primer on value-based stock picking—have famously personified as

## Suppressing emotion is the key to wealth, Buffett preaches; the dull and steadfast will inherit the earth from the fancy and neurotic.

the flighty "Mr. Market." According to this conceit, investing success is a matter not of intelligence, social position, or inside information but of simple common sense and psychological self-control—an encouraging message for the average person, and perhaps the best reason for Buffett's popularity with the aspiring middle class. Suppressing emotion is the key to wealth, he preaches; the dull and steadfast will inherit the earth from the fancy and neurotic.

Not many people have Bill Gates's IQ, Donald Trump's brazenness, or Tom Cruise's looks, but almost anyone—with a bit of discipline—can have Warren Buffett's temperament. That, at least, is the promise he holds out: unlike most tycoons, he can be imitated, because he's just like the rest of us, only more so.

Buffett's public image represents a singular cultural accomplishment whose difficulty is hard to overstate. Until Buffett came along, the notion of a folk-hero investor was an oxymoron in America. Before the 1920s, buying and selling corporate securities was regarded by ordinary people as an occult activity practiced by a shad-

owy elite acting in nobody's interest but its own. This view changed, of course, when a prolonged bull market, widely promoted as unstoppable, started sucking in the Main Street masses. It was a golden moment. Then came the Crash. Suddenly the denizens of Wall Street seemed even more sinister, selfish, and cynical than they had before—an impression that lingered for decades. When the markets recovered a portion of their lost honor in the 1950s and 1960s, ordinary Americans kept their distance, intimidated by a Brahmin hauteur. The leading investment personality of the 1970s, Louis Rukeyser, for more than thirty years the host of TV's *Wall Street Week*, had the patrician profile of a Founding Father, the flowing hair of a concert pianist, and the clubby nasal voice of a Harvard English professor. He was a true blue blood or a smooth fraud or some of both. What he wasn't was one's neighbor. Identifying with Rukeyser was impossible; this marble bust could only be *beheld*.

The market's next media star was less pretentious, but his affect and appearance were equally odd. The Street-beating mutual-fund manager Peter Lynch, of Fidelity Investments, had prematurely white hair, a pink complexion, a face and body nearly devoid of flesh, and a nerdy, asexual demeanor that seemed to mark him as a sheltered prodigy who had lived indoors all his life to spare his allergies, and had researched stocks while soaking in the tub. Lynch's message was not dissimilar to Buffett's: buy shares in firms whose products you like and use; don't get the willies

when prices drop, or succumb to euphoria when they go up; and turn a deaf ear to tipsters, sharpies, and analysts. But the messenger resembled a friendly alien possessed of uncanny intuitive gifts that seemed normal only to him. Lynch insisted that any earthling could use his methods, but one sensed that he overestimated us. The best bet was to buy into his fund, Magellan—which, by the time most Americans had heard of Lynch, had risen so high that its potential seemed spent. And then, abruptly, Lynch gave up his post and faded inexorably from the public's view, despite Fidelity's decision to send him around as its roving corporate ambassador. He had stopped making money for people, so who cared?

Lynch's exit, in 1990, left Buffett alone in the arena. He'd been raising his profile for some time by then (the business press had been raising it for him, actually), but his fame was largely limited to money mavens. He hadn't yet become a semi-official national treasure—the last honest capitalist as conceived by Frank Capra, pitting his provincial integrity against the big boys' metropolitan guile, and sharing the spoils with the folks back home.



His breakthrough into superstardom, sometime in the early nineties, was precipitated by a lucky cluster of events over which Buffett had no direct control. The economic weather was right. Growing doubts about the Social Security system, and the widespread embrace of IRAs and other tax-deductible retirement-savings plans, caused the stock-owning population to balloon just as the tech-led bull market was starting to look like a wealth-creating perpetual-motion machine. All one needed to ride it was a computer and a discount brokerage account; to monitor its movements, track its chatter, meet its VIPs, and learn its language, one had only to watch CNBC. The country was turning into one big trading desk.

In the turbulent news stream that flowed across this desk, Buffett's name was a tidal presence. Stocks rose on rumors of his interest in them, and quickly fell back when the rumors were dispelled. When he bought a company outright (any company, no matter how pedestrian or obscure), the talking heads dissected his decision and ritually concluded that it showed genius. When the NASDAQ retreated for two or three days running, Buffett's disdainful statements about tech stocks were deemed prophetic; and when the index climbed to a new high, his negative comments were talked about in a way that reaffirmed his legend but set it in the past tense. America's greatest, most influential investor (almost everyone acknowledged that he'd earned the title) was said by the experts to have lost his touch and dwindled into an "old economy" has-been. All the traits that have earned him tens of billions—his long-term outlook, his midwestern probity, his practice of buying on the dips and closing his checkbook during the advances, his total lack of interest in the Next Big Thing, and, most important, his belief that the market is just a running opinion poll that prices stocks by assigning the same weight to whims, hallucinations, and wild guesses as it does to rational judgments—were now recast as crippling prejudices, or even symptoms of creeping senility. My own go-go broker told me over lunch one day (after touting a glamour stock named Nortel, whose balance sheet would have made Buffett laugh out loud, but whose price seemed to double every couple of months), "The man's defunct. He's in denial. We're living in a new age, and he can't handle it."

To be canonized, one must first die. With the Oracle of Omaha's portfolio underperforming the average Toledo schoolteacher's, Buffett was declared dead by the financial world in the late 1990s and then, after a pause for *schadenfreude*, fondly elevated to sainthood. The eulogies served a

hidden purpose. By remembering Buffett as nearly infallible and making him the great icon of traditionalism, the children of perpetual motion affirmed their new faith. The twisted syllogism went like this: If Buffett, who knew almost everything, was wrong, then investors who know almost nothing must be right. Or: If Buffett can lose, then anyone can win.

As in Twain's case, the rumors of Buffett's death proved to be greatly exaggerated. And like Tom Sawyer, who attended his own funeral in disguise and snickered at the solemn goings-on there, Buffett probably took some secret pleasure in imagining the effect his resurrection (which his sense of history told him was inevitable) would have on the people who were just pretending to miss him.

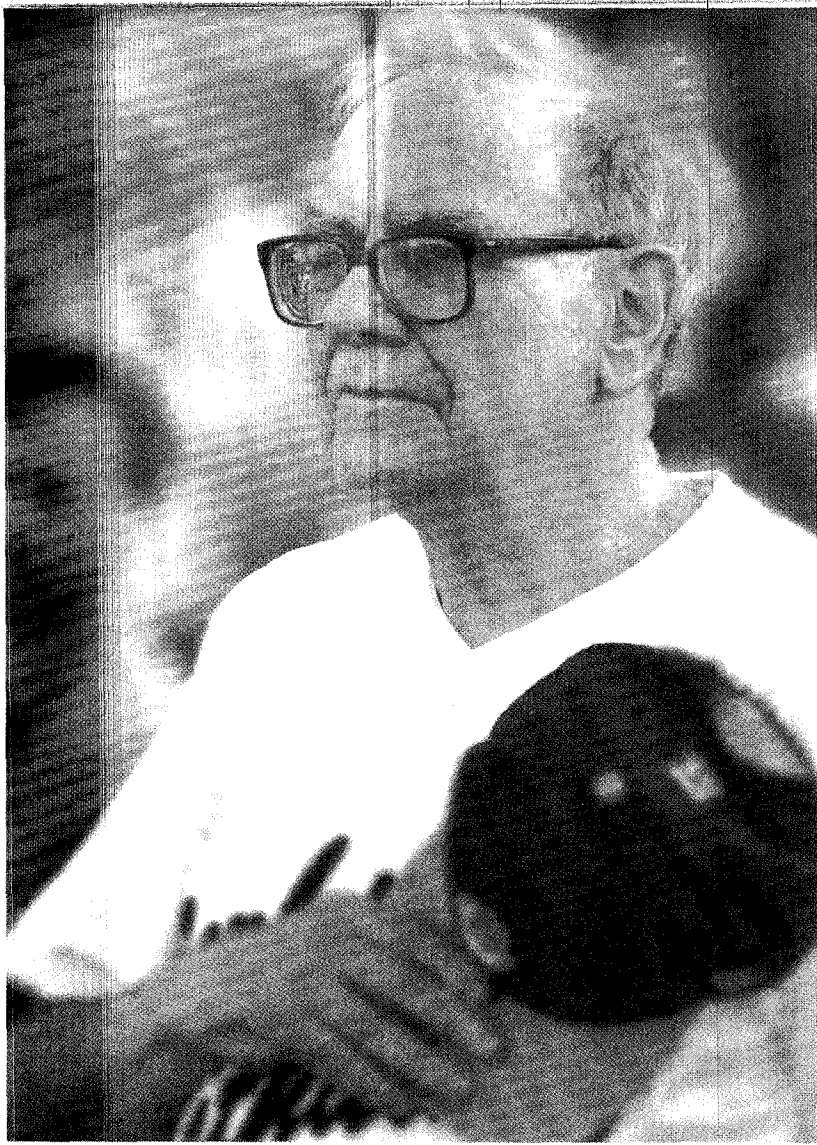
In the meantime, he sent letters from the tomb to his true disciples: Berkshire's shareholders. In 1999, the stock's worst year ever both in absolute terms and in comparison with the S&P, Buffett assured them that his philosophy—a liberalized version of his old professor Graham's "value" approach—hadn't changed and wasn't going to change, even if the world itself did. He also reminded the panicky and

## Buffett was declared dead by the financial world in the late 1990s and then, after a pause for *schadenfreude*, fondly elevated to sainthood.

the depressed that the stock represented all but one percent of his personal assets ("We eat our own cooking," Buffett and Munger often like to say). He wound up by conceding that the new technologies would probably "transform" society, but said it was his prerogative as an old codger who'd done pretty well for himself over the years to tend his own garden while others built Utopia. "We just stick with what we understand," he wrote, lumping himself with his fellow Luddite, Munger. They knew nothing about geology, either, he wrote, or about several other important industries, but it hadn't prevented them from getting rich backing businesses they *did* know something about.

In the hyperbolic climate of the tech boom, with the media loudly lamenting Buffett's demise while it heralded the coming wired paradise, this sensible, understated rationale for declining to join the party was a brilliant rhetorical gesture. "I would prefer not to," says Melville's *Bartleby*, when asked why he refuses to leave his desk even though he no longer has a job. Buffett's response to his critics was just as memorable, just as disarming. Fiber-optic switches? Waveplex multipliers? Don't understand them. (And, truth-





fully, who did?) Buffett's indifference to cyberspace made fools of millions of panting investors who'd staked their retirements on gear and gizmos they probably wouldn't recognize if crateloads of them were dumped on their doorsteps.

The following year, as mentioned earlier, brought a modest gain for Buffett and a beating about the head for his antagonists. The NASDAQ, whose tech listings embodied the whiz kids' futuristic aspirations, crashed, got up again, fell down the stairs, and staggered around like a sloppy waterfront drunk. But aside from a pointed homily on the difference between investment and speculation, the 2000 letter went light on the I-told-you-sos. It talked business, and one business especially: the almost invisible reinsurance field, led by the obscure but mammoth Gen Re, the largest of Berkshire's wholly owned subsidiaries, the foundation of its financial structure, and the key to understanding Buffett's true character as opposed to the character the public assigns him. Buffett the straight-talking conscience of capitalism is, at bottom, a casino operator, and his casino is the whole world.

NATI HARNIK/AP PHOTO

Gen Re is a vehicle for accepting bets, enormous bets, for the very highest stakes. A comparatively small bet, cited in Buffett's 2000 letter, involved Grab.com, an Internet firm that hoped to draw traffic to its site by offering visitors a chance to win a billion dollars. The odds were low that anyone would take the prize, but not so low that Grab.com wasn't willing to pay Gen Re to accept responsibility for paying it. Gen Re bet that it wouldn't have to, and won.

But this was a quirky, small-potatoes wager compared with the bets Gen Re is used to making on the likelihood of major earthquakes, killer hurricanes, and other shattering catastrophes, known as "mega-cats." It makes these bets with other insurance companies, which, should a mega-cat occur, might buckle from having to pay the overload of claims. To put it simply, Gen Re earns its fees by backing other gamblers' biggest gambles, and then uses these fees (the so-called "float") to bankroll yet other bets on the behavior of stocks and bonds and so on. Buffett views the float as essentially a low-cost loan, though, borrowed against the potential mega-cats—or perhaps the single super-mega-cat—that could oblige Gen Re to pay it back.

Buffett, the incomparable simplifier of arcane financial concepts, explained the reinsurance game with a streetwise candor befitting a Brooklyn bookie: "We receive a modest premium, face the possibility of a huge loss, and get good odds."

Those "modest" premiums add up, providing Buffett with the enormous pool of virtually no-cost liquid capital that lets him make cash offers for whole companies within fifteen minutes (or so he often boasts) of getting an asking price. The losses he risks in exchange for this rare privilege aren't just huge, however; they're monumental. And the good odds are merely that—good odds. It's hard to exaggerate the nerve involved here. Instead of the thousands of short-term fears faced by lesser investors—stock X will fall on disappointing earnings news; stock Y will stagnate owing to flattening sales; the market itself will plummet on rumors of war—Buffett faces a vast and long-term terror: the mega-cat of mega-cats, whatever it might prove to be. Although Gen Re reserves plenty of money for rainy days, its owner has written that "there is nothing symmetrical about surprises in the insurance business."

All of which raises an inevitable question: Who insures the reinsurer? Jehovah?



On September 11, 2001, the question was answered: No one does. Buffett was hosting a golf tournament in Omaha when the mega-cat hit Manhattan. According to someone who was at the tournament, a top officer at a major bank, the magnates and CEOs out on the course first panicked about the act of terrorism and then began fretting about the possibility of insulting Buffett by leaving early and rushing home. The source wouldn't talk about Buffett's own demeanor, but left the impression that he remained composed—at least in comparison with his guests.

In his 2001 letter Buffett was still composed, despite having suffered, through Gen Re, a healthy portion of the largest loss in the history of the insurance industry. He wrote that he had “overlooked” the possibility that the next mega-cat would be man-made, and he scolded himself as an underwriter for “focusing on experience, rather than exposure.” Buffett's superbly impersonal formulation describes a universal human weakness—our blockheaded blindness to the unfamiliar—that he needn't have apologized for sharing. Still, it was sporting of him to do so, considering that most people don't earn billions of dollars by estimating the likelihood of mega-cats.

Buffett went on in the letter to analyze the probability of an attack—nuclear, biological, or chemical—large enough to bankrupt the insurance industry and, as a consequence, Berkshire and himself. The risk was low, he asserted, but it was rising, and in any event it would never reach zero. “The best the nation can achieve is a series of stalemates,” he concluded. He called on the government to absorb the risk of what might be a trillion-dollar loss, and he warned the public that unless this happened, it was on its own. “Fear may recede with time,” he wrote, “but the danger won't.” He summed up by telling Berkshire's shareholders that the company was in a better position than most firms to survive another such catastrophe.

He added, in what could be his epitaph: “At Berkshire, we retain our risks and depend on no one.”

No wonder he doesn't cower before tornadoes. No wonder his mere presence in a political campaign is enough to inspire voters' confidence. And no wonder he can speak humorously and simply about delusional securities markets, scandalous accounting practices, corrupt corporate management structures, and other troublesome topics that his peers would rather not discuss at all and that the press can only shriek about. No wonder he seems so calm, so cool, so dry, so patient, so fluent, and so darn ... reassuring.

It's Warren Buffett versus the apocalypse, and until the apocalypse arrives (he understands the odds; he probably calculates them in his sleep), the charming old gambler can afford to kid around. ■

*Walter Kirn is a novelist and critic who lives in Livingston, Montana.*

# Books About Schnooks

*They are the very models of the modern chief executive*

BY ALEX BEAM

In June of 2002 ABC's Sunday news show *This Week* broadcast the kind of howler for which network television is justifiably famous. The business meltdown was much in the news. Enron was history, having declared bankruptcy six months earlier. But WorldCom and Xerox had just revealed multibillion-dollar accounting discrepancies. Even Martha Stewart was heading for the dock.

Sam Donaldson invited his guest, Richard Grasso, the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, to comment on the “crisis of confidence” in corporate America.

GRASSO: We've got to root out the bad people, punish them, and we've got to make certain that the accountants and the independent directors that oversee the more than twelve thousand publicly traded corporations in America perform their job ...

The University of British Columbia law professor Joel Bakan features this interview in the introduction to his anti-corporate screed, *The Corporation: The Pathological Pursuit of Profit and Power*. Just after Bakan's book was published, New York's attorney general, Eliot Spitzer, sued both Grasso and the NYSE, charging that the chairman's gargantuan salary and severance package—\$187 million—violated all norms of human decency. Well, something to that effect. The show trial can be expected shortly.

The years 2001 and 2002 saw not only the aftereffects of the dot-com implosion and the punishing economic consequences of 9/11 but also the scandalous collapse of huge companies deemed to be market leaders. Highfliers like Enron, the telecom venture Global Crossing, the cable company Adelphia, and Dennis Kozlowski's conglomerate Tyco went both broke and ugly, awash in accounting fraud, self-dealing, and executive behavior deemed wildly unethical even by the pliable standards of the business elite.

After the deluge, the books.

The best of the recent books about these business blow-ups is Roger Lowenstein's *Origins of the Crash: The Great Bubble and Its Undoing*. It is also the most annoying. Perhaps because of his successes with a best-selling biography of



the business guru Warren Buffett and an account of the spectacular failure of the hedge fund Long-Term Capital Management, *When Genius Failed*, Lowenstein has adopted a didactic, Galbraithian tone that may work for the sage of Cambridge but doesn't for the sage of Westfield, New Jersey. It merely sounds pompous. To be fair, Lowenstein does use simple language well to explain complex situations. For example, "The distinction between self-interest and greed is worth retaining, for it is a distinction that, in the 90s, was utterly lost."

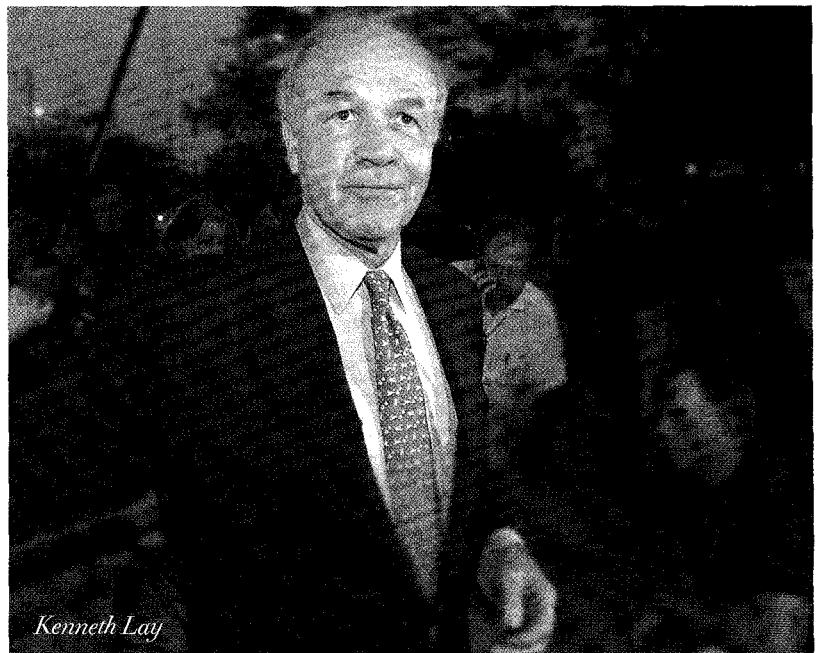
Lowenstein indicts the cult of share value and its effect on the predominantly white men who run big corporations. The chief executive often reports to a board of directors—a "Pet Rock" board, in Ross Perot's memorable phrase—of which he is the chairman, and which rewards him with cut-rate options to buy the company's stock rather than with a large salary. In theory this aligns the executive's interest with that of the shareholders: they all want the stock to rise. In practice, Lowenstein argues, options are the era's "original sin." Executives pump the stock for the quarterly gains that please Wall Street. More insidious, if the stock's value declines, the captive board simply awards the boss more stock, at a lower price. Lowenstein calls stock options "alms for billionaires." Exhibit A would be the Walt Disney Company's capo Michael Eisner, who collected \$800 million worth of options from 1990 to 2003—"during which time his investors earned less than a Treasury-bond return," according to Lowenstein. "The notion that CEOs deserved to be paid for performance morphed, quite simply, into the notion that they should be *paid*."

Lowenstein writes that in Alfred P. Sloan Jr.'s memoir, *My Years With General Motors*, "there is no mention of GM's share price in his decision-making." In contrast, Jeffrey Skilling, Kenneth Lay's notorious Harvard Business School-trained deputy at Enron, based *every* decision on its effect on Enron's share price. Skilling decided to plunge Enron—at heart an oil-and-gas-trading company—into a deal to sell videos on the Web with Blockbuster, not because it made any sense (it failed quickly) but because he thought it would add \$20 to Enron's stock price.

Enron, of course, stands front and center in *Origins*. When the "crooked E" (its logo was a capital E balanced at an angle) slipped beneath the waves, in December of 2001, it was the largest bankruptcy in American history. The collapse pulled the accounting giant Arthur Andersen under and threw 4,500 employees onto the street. Many of the cashiered staffers

were left pensionless, because their savings plans had been locked up in Enron stock. John and Jane Q. Public were also huge losers, because almost every major stock brokerage and mutual fund had been hyping Enron since the mid-1990s. Before the company went bust, a Merrill Lynch analyst opined that Enron was "uniquely positioned to be the General Electric of the new economy."

In his much overpraised book, *Searching for a Corporate Savior: The Irrational Quest for Charismatic CEOs*, the Harvard Business School professor Rakesh Khurana rehashes the do-people-make-history-or-does-"history"-make-history? argument better hashed by Leo Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. In the case of Enron, one would have to look at the small cast of characters who took a prosperous company and turned it



Kenneth Lay

into the greatest business debacle of the young century.

Bosses often boast that they always hire people smarter than themselves, and in Lay's case that must not have been hard. Lay, whose father was a preacher, got off to a fast start in life, parlaying his Ph.D. in economics and his superb schmoozing skills into a sub-Cabinet-level job in Richard Nixon's Interior Department. But Lay's wrong-foot instincts later surfaced when an improbable candidate for the Texas governorship, George W. Bush, sought to kiss the corporate titan's ring. Lay signaled his preference for Bush's heavily favored opponent, Ann Richards. How very unsurprising that when Lay phoned the Bushies in 2001, asking for a bailout, he got a polite runaround.

Lay loved the attention lavished on the moneyed elite of

Houston; what he didn't like was running a company named HNG-InterNorth that pushed British thermal units through a metal tube from point A to point B. Selling natural gas was boring. Frat boys from Baylor and the University of Texas could do that. Even the company's name was boring. Lay wanted to rechristen the firm "Enteron," but that had to be abandoned because it evoked the alimentary canal. Enron was the second choice.

Lay's in-house geniuses, including Skilling and the chief financial officer, Andrew Fastow, didn't want to pump gas either. They wanted to wheel and deal, and they soon plunged Enron into businesses it knew nothing about: selling water in Europe; "wheeling" electric power into, and mostly out of, California; installing commercial air-conditioning systems; the Blockbuster deal; and, of course, the Internet. Agglomerating showy but unrelated businesses is the hallmark of Shamco, the fictional "energy-telecom-pharmaceutical giant" that features in Andy Borowitz's satire *Who Moved My Soap? The CEO's Guide to Surviving in Prison*. It seems worth mentioning that Fastow is headed for ten years in the pen, where one can reasonably assume he will be joined by his former colleagues Lay and Skilling. Company reunion time! In prison, Borowitz writes, "your chances of recognizing someone from your business school class will be better than 50 per cent, and even better than that if you went to Harvard."

For ten rich years Enron beat the band. By astutely buying and selling off businesses, and by shunting loser assets into Fastow's notorious "special-purpose entities" (shell corporations controlled by Enron insiders who bought companies from Enron at inflated prices), it made its stock march upward through the 1990s, more than tripling the gains of the benchmark Standard & Poor's 500. For six years running, *Fortune* magazine named Enron "America's most innovative company." Enron's success gave new evidence for the depressing observation that everyone is a whore—it's just a matter of negotiating price. Bigwigs such as Nelson Mandela and Alan Greenspan showed up at Enron functions to collect "public service" awards. The writers William Kristol and Paul Krugman pocketed \$50,000 honoraria for "advising" the Texas potentates.

In their book, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind, of *Fortune*, portray Kenneth Lay as the Sta-Puf marshmallow man of corporate America, who loved meeting important people and hated saying no to his headstrong subordinates. In his neatly written circling-the-drain memoir, *Anatomy of Greed: The Unshred-*

*ded Truth From an Enron Insider*, Brian Cruver calls Lay "Elmer Fudd dressed in late '80s business attire."

*Anatomy of Greed* reads like a volume in the Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook series—"How to survive as a middle manager if your company is lying to everyone, especially its employees, and going bankrupt." Cruver's best survival tip: Sign up for direct deposit. Enron stopped paychecks for laid-off employees, but for some reason kept wiring money to the bank accounts of staffers who had opted for the automatic-payroll-deposit plan.

Maybe Lay should have taken Cruver's advice. Astonishingly, despite having extracted more than \$200 million worth of compensation over the years, he was deeply in debt when Enron stock started to plunge, in the summer of 2001. McLean and Elkind grace us with his wonderful reaction—"What the f--- is going on around here?"—upon learning that a senior executive had transferred an interest in a "special purpose entity" to his male domestic partner. It is hard to imagine that Lay's reputation will survive this excerpt from *Smartest Guys*:

**In his neatly written circling-the-drain memoir, *Anatomy of Greed*, Brian Cruver describes Enron's chief executive, Kenneth Lay, as "Elmer Fudd dressed in late '80s business attire."**

Just before Skilling took over as CEO, Lay appeared in his office. The stock had already started to fall, the broadband business was in meltdown, and the entire state of California was blaming Enron for turning out the lights. In the midst of all this, there was Enron's chairman, holding fabric swatches for decorating the new \$45 million G-5 corporate jet he'd ordered for Enron. "What interior configuration do you like, Jeff?" Lay asked.

Yes, *Smartest Guys* is a bit too full of accounting minutiae. But McLean and Elkind might have sold more books with the perfectly justifiable subtitle *Sex! Alcohol! Suicide!* There is plenty of each to go around.

Some of the sex in the Enron tale is in the person of the mini-skirted Enron International chief Rebecca Mark, a drop-dead blonde from Central Casting via the Harvard Business School. We see her going to bed with her boss, climbing in and out of private jets, and roaring in and out of the Enron parking lot in her ruby-red Jaguar XK8 convertible. The star energy trader Lou Pai, her colleague, didn't mind blowing Enron expense money on exotic dancers,



one of whom he eventually married. Pai fled Enron before the collapse, \$250 million to the good.

McLean and Elkind show Skilling frequenting too many dimly lit bars and behaving erratically as the company he was supposed to be running headed south. This past spring Skilling, who once boasted, "I *am* Enron!", spent the night at a New York City hospital after police officers picked him up, drunk and uncooperative, in the company of his second wife, Enron's former corporate secretary. And the Enron story was darkened by the suicide of its talented mergers-and-acquisitions chief, Clifford Baxter, who shot himself in his new Mercedes S500 not far from his Houston home. He was forty-three.

There is no doubt that in the annals of the crash/meltdown/crisis of confidence/whatever of 2001–2002, the Enron bankruptcy was the main event. But Lowenstein correctly notes that the rot spread quickly from the bad apples to the shinier fruit. He writes that the longtime General Electric chairman Jack Welch's "iconic stature" was "badly damaged" when details of Welch's Caligula-worthy retirement perquisites were published in *The Wall Street Journal*. With GE's stock starting to slide just as the chairman left, "Welch now looked like just another overpaid boss."

Christopher Byron, the author of *Testosterone, Inc.: Tales of CEOs Gone Wild*, likewise delights in watching the air escape from Chairman Welch's self-inflated balloon. After a "career that seemed to be arcing toward business immortality," Byron writes, Welch was now "[making] a public spectacle of himself at the feet of an odd woman from Boston who liked to boast of her sexual exploits with CEOs." That would be the former *Harvard Business Review* editor Suzy Wetlaufer—Mrs. Jack Welch, Release 3.0.

Byron purports to have written a book about the business and psychosexual excesses of four chief executives: Welch, Tyco's Dennis Kozlowski, Revlon's Ronald Perelman, and "Chainsaw Al" Dunlap, the disgraced former chairman of Sunbeam. What Byron has mostly done is embarrassed himself. The book contains some of the most grotesque pseudo-writing of our time, and egregious quotation from Yeats and Tennyson; a better subtitle might be *English Major Gone Wild*. Worse yet, it is full of small errors—"cachet" misspelled two ways by page 27; a reference to the (gasp) Boston Red Socks—and colossal misprisions of judgment. Byron publishes so much unsourced innuendo about Welch's early years with GE, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, that I actually started to feel sorry for Jack—until, that is, I read his idiotic memoir, *Jack: Straight From the Cut*.

Maybe it's me. Perhaps Welch's oddball tales of "deep diving" into the many forlorn crannies of General Electric

with some young comer from the Appliances Division fascinate the business elite. (In his 1963 memoir Alfred Sloan's favored colleagues are inevitably praised as "sound.") If you have to buy Welch's book—and don't do it on my account—get the revised, 2003 edition, with "a new afterword." Between the 2001 first edition and the paperback, Jack's second wife took him to the cleaners, just three years after their prenuptial agreement expired. File under "Risks of marrying a corporate lawyer."

*Straight From the Cut's* gag-inducing new afterword has a nosegay for Wetlaufer, "whose beauty, brilliance, and goodness make every day perfect for me," plus some exculpatory patter blaming the usual suspects for embarrassing revelations about the sports tickets, opera tickets, car, driver, and so on that GE had piled on top of Welch's \$350,000 monthly—repeat, monthly—retirement payments. Here's Jack: "In the post-Enron world, the media immediately dove into the fray, and some documents ended up being portrayed as something they decidedly were not—'revelations' about my so-called retirement package."

Doggone reporters! If only they would write about my Six Sigma quality program, or how those Hudson River environmentalists keep picking on me!

In his fairy-tale memoir Welch writes that "women and minorities in [GE] management have increased by over 70 per cent since 1996." Yet for some reason he prints the business agenda of the 2001 GE operating managers' meeting, in Boca Raton, Florida, and it's easy to see that of the twenty-seven executives giving presentations, only one was a woman. (True, there are women named Mike and Tiger, but I'm willing to bet they weren't at that meeting.) As Rakesh Khurana, the Harvard Business School professor, writes in *Searching for a Corporate Savior*, when a woman or an African-American rises to the top of an American corporation, it's an event worthy of a magazine cover story: "People still expect a CEO to be a white male of a certain age, and, often, of a certain educational and class background."

A few women have broken through the proverbial glass ceiling, but only one has had two books written about her: Carly Fiorina, the chairman and CEO of the Palo Alto-based Hewlett-Packard. Fiorina, who in 1999 was drafted into the top job at HP on the strength of a puffy 1998 *Fortune* cover story about her work at Lucent, faced a bitter proxy fight in 2001 launched by Hewlett and Packard family members who opposed her decision to merge with Compaq. The prevailing climate of business scandal didn't help her case. Fiorina was looking like a loser in the fight, George Anders writes in *Perfect Enough: Carly Fiorina and the Reinvention of Hewlett-Packard*.

Like a senator running for President, Fiorina was cursed with insider status. Many large pension funds decided to vote against her, in fact, because she enjoyed the support of HP's board of directors.

No one wants her or his achievements belittled by the conversational asterisk "because she is a woman" or "because he is black." Reading both Anders's book and Peter Burrows's *Backfire: Carly Fiorina's High-Stakes Battle for the Soul of Hewlett-Packard*, I would have to rate Fiorina's sex as something of a wash as regards her career. She is not a technologist, like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates, but that's hardly unusual; many CEOs hail from the ranks of marketing or corporate law. Her great skill, according to Anders, is "aspirational rhetoric." Of her time at Lucent, Anders writes, "She didn't really sell phone switches. She sold panoramic stories of hope and progress." (Khurana writes waspishly of Fiorina's Lucent years, "Much of this 'success,' it was later revealed, was due to creative accounting and liberal financing of sales to consumers.") Selling panoramic stories of hope and progress worked for Ronald Reagan. It is working for Carly Fiorina.

There is plenty of evidence that Fiorina is uncomfortable trading on her sex. For example, Burrows quotes her former University of Maryland Business School dean as saying that Fiorina was not interested in helping him set up an M.B.A. course specifically for women: "She doesn't play any of the gender games. If you perform well, you can't be denied." But she is smart, and will use the system however she needs to. Once, after Lucent had taken over a particularly rambunctious computer company, Fiorina appeared onstage with socks stuffed into her trousers, to reassure her new charges that "[Lucent's] balls were as big as anyone's" in corporate America. I notice on HP's Web site that six of the thirteen (bad luck—fire someone immediately!) members of Fiorina's "executive team" are women—a very high percentage for a Fortune 50 company.

Membership in the CEO elite has its privileges, and Fiorina is not squeamish about claiming them. Like Ken Lay, she has a thing for Gulfstreams; Hewlett-Packard invested \$56 million in two G-IVs a few months after she took over the company. At the time of her hiring, according to Anders, she asked HP to pay to move her yacht from the East Coast to the West Coast through the Panama Canal. "Just sell the boat," an HP director told her, and eventually she did.

Rakesh Khurana downplays the importance of "charismatic CEOs" like Fiorina, who, he argues, perform no better or worse than run-of-the-mill clock-punchers in the long run. That's when we are all dead, if you remember your Keynes. Joel Bakan agrees that it couldn't matter less who sits atop the corporate pyramid, because

shareholder capitalism is hopelessly corrupt. Not just corrupt but diseased. And not just diseased but ... insane.

A while back I spotted Bakan's book, *The Corporation*, prominently displayed in the Harvard Business School bookstore. On the inside front cover I read, "An eminent law professor and legal theorist, Bakan contends that the corporation is created by law to function much like a psychopathic personality whose destructive behavior, if left unchecked, leads to scandal and ruin."

I burst out laughing. I couldn't not buy the book.

*The Corporation* is the book on which the Canadian movie of the same name was based. The movie features the countercultural historian Howard Zinn, the bio-activist Jeremy Rifkin, the professor of linguistics and philosophy Noam Chomsky, and the belle of the anti-globalism ball, the soignée logophobe Naomi Klein. I couldn't survive the two-hour-and-twenty-five-minute movie, but I did soldier through the 228-page book.

The thesis, which is based on an "analysis" of corporate behavior heavily influenced by the American Psychiatric Association's absurd *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, fourth edition, is laughable, but the book does have its moments. Who remembers, for instance, that a group of Wall Street plutocrats hoped to recruit a decorated Marine general to overthrow Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1934? Well, I didn't. And Bakan finds our old friend Alfred P. Sloan Jr. defending his decision to continue doing business with the Third Reich in 1939, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. The German operations of General Motors were "highly profitable," Sloan explained to an inquiring shareholder. The internal politics of Nazi Germany "should not be considered the business of the management of GM." Sound fellows, those Nazis.

If you have been in a classroom lately, you may have heard the teacher say, "So, what are the takeaway points?" I heard this first in a business-school class I was visiting; it seemed to gratify the businessperson's blessed rage for simplification—"Fifty Business Books Condensed on One Audiotape!" So here are the takeaway points from these ten books.

1. Greed is good, until the Securities and Exchange Commission gets involved. Even then it's not so bad if it has allowed you to retain a former enforcement director of the SEC as your defense lawyer.

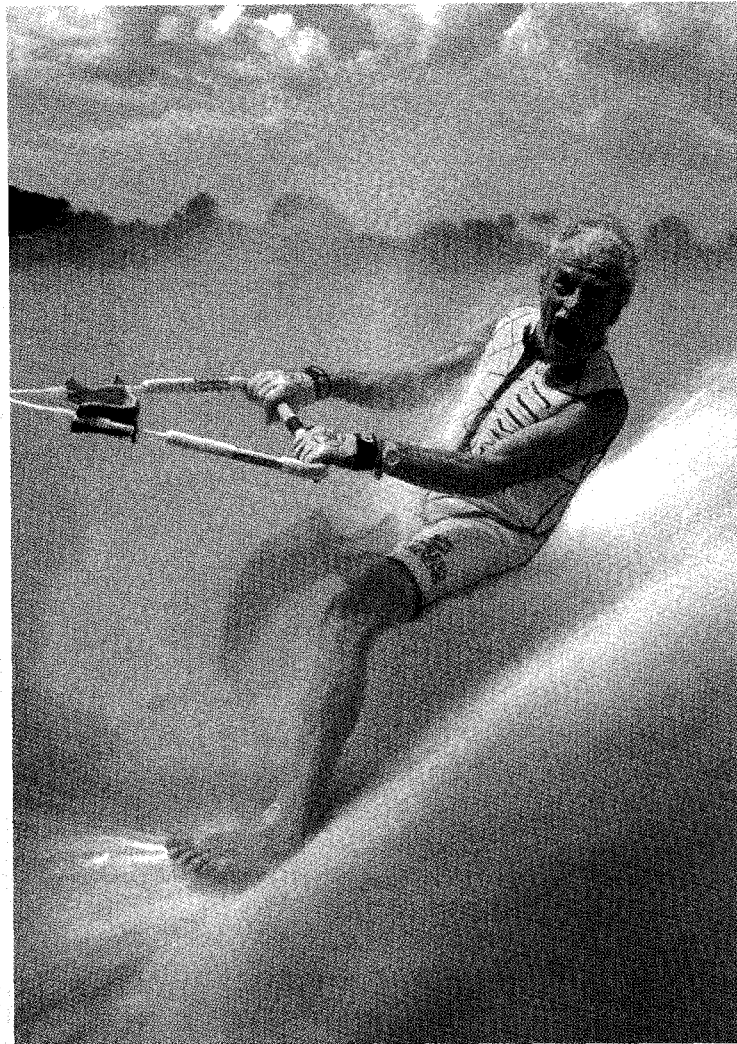
2. *Fortune* is fickle. With much fanfare the magazine proclaimed Jack Welch "manager of the century" in 1999. Just a year later it asked its readers, "Who is the world's greatest CEO? ... Why not [Cisco Systems' chief executive] John Chambers?"

3. Always—always—opt for direct deposit. ▀

*Alex Beam is a columnist for The Boston Globe.*



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# The Queen of Tween

*Last spring Anne Sweeney took charge of a “mess” of a network—ABC—that was buried in the ratings. Can a woman whose background is children’s cable programming save a broadcast network with a history of management problems? To do so, she may just have to reinvent the television business*

BY SRIDHAR PAPPU

“S eriously,” David Spade says to me, “What’s this story about?”

It’s a hot August day in Burbank, California, and the unshaven Spade is standing in the near-empty Disney-owned studio where *8 Simple Rules* is shot. When I tell him that it’s a piece on Anne Sweeney, the forty-six-year-old woman who, after six successful years in charge of Disney’s non-sports cable properties, was tapped last April to take over the ABC Network, Spade, who plays a character named C.J. on *8 Simple Rules*, nods his head a couple of times and says, “Anne Sweeney. Anne Sweeney. Right.” The onetime movie sidekick of Chris Farley, Spade has since leaving *Saturday Night Live* built a career playing variations on the same character—a sarcastic little guy who can hurl insults with a precision that cuts straight to people’s greatest fears and insecurities, their regrets and unrealized hopes.

“Yeah,” Spade continues, in his trademark whiny drawl. “Anne came over to the house one night and we fixed a couple of things in the schedule. It’s cool now.”

With that Spade exits stage left for lunch, leaving the show’s publicist, Jeff Fordis, and me to watch the actress Katey Sagal—who spent a decade as the sexually frustrated wife on *Married... With Children*—rehearse a scene. *8 Simple Rules*’s director, James Widdoes, best known as Hoover, the well-meaning but overmatched president of Delta Tau Chi fraternity in *National Lampoon’s Animal House*, sets up the shots, laughing hysterically at everything Sagal says.

After a moment Fordis says, “David was just kidding about Anne coming over, you know.”

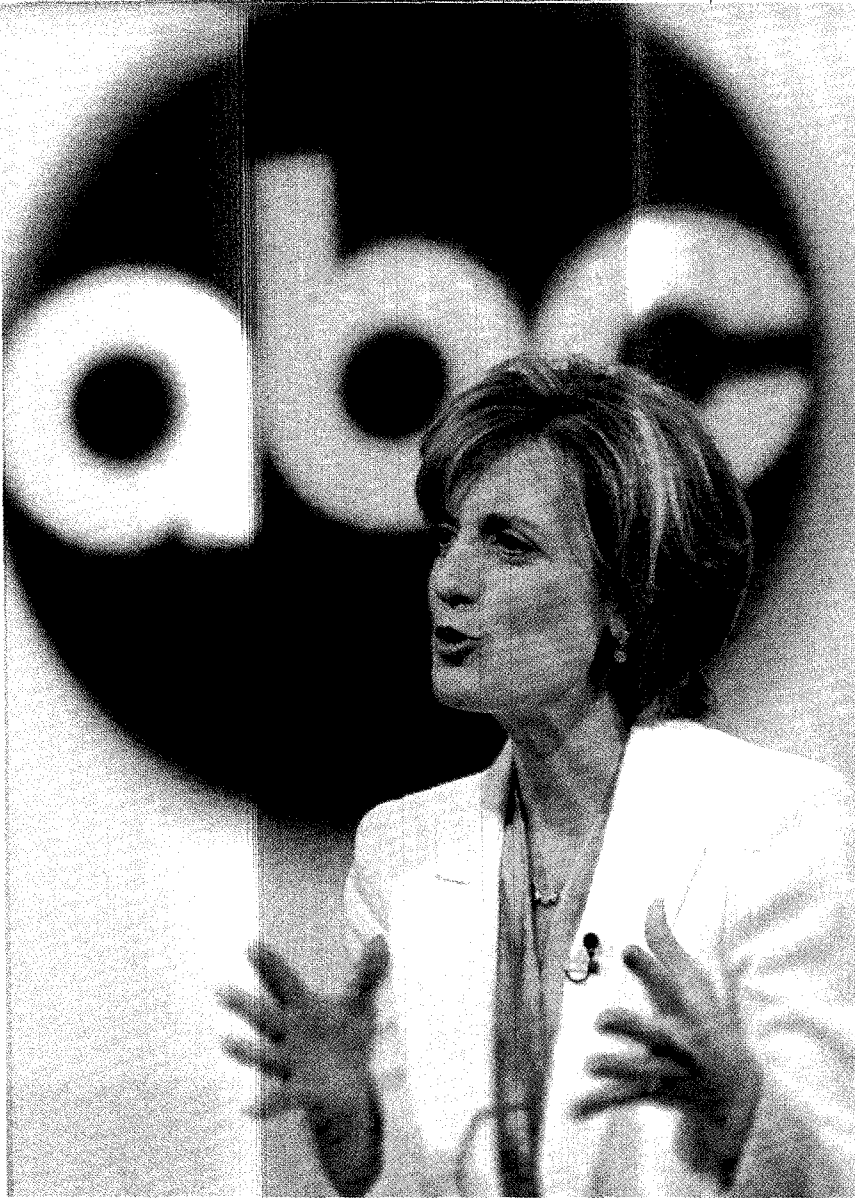
“I know,” I say. But I can understand why Fordis worries that I might really believe that Sweeney dropped by Spade’s pad one evening with a bulletin board and a six-pack to help her work out the network’s fall lineup. Things at ABC have been so bad lately—its recent history of public gaffes, missed opportunities, and internal wranglings have been playing out for months in the pages of *The New York Times* and *Variety*, the *Hollywood Reporter* and the *Los Angeles Times*—that one could be forgiven for thinking, Why not?

Maybe someone decided to let David Spade call the shots.

Who runs ABC at any given moment has been an ongoing trivia question for the past ten years or so. Since 1995—when Disney merged with Capital Cities/ABC in a \$19 billion deal—the top job at the network has been like the post of manager of the New York Yankees in the 1980s, when George Steinbrenner fitfully hired and fired skippers almost annually, only to finish the decade without a World Series ring. As executives have come and gone, the product on the air has been inconsistent and ultimately unwatched by an American public that in the age of cable no longer has to give network television the benefit of the doubt.

At every turn during this period, it seems, ABC called for the wrong play at the wrong moment. There was the attempt to make the network into a clone of NBC, which was then achieving ratings bonanzas with *Friends* and *Seinfeld*—hip young stars sitting in apartments furnished by Ikea. There was the brief success and then the overuse of a game show—*Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*—that seemed to run every night, over and over and over again, to the point where we didn’t care whether or not someone won the \$1 million prize or how many damn lifelines were left. And then there were the unseized moments, any one of which might have helped make ABC the broadcast juggernaut it seemed destined to be when it first gained access to the resources and power of mighty Disney: the network turned down *Survivor* (now a perennially top-ranked show for CBS) not once but three times; it balked at *Scrubs* (now a hit comedy on NBC) and *CSI* (now a hit franchise, with two spinoffs, on CBS), both of which, gallingly, were developed by Touchstone, Disney’s in-house television production unit; and when *Survivor*’s creator, Mark Burnett, came to ABC with *The Apprentice*, the network’s inability to move quickly enough allowed that show, which became a huge hit last year, to land at NBC. Last season ABC finished a distant fourth in the ratings, behind NBC, CBS, and even Fox, and it is reportedly losing \$250 million a year. In May, during ABC’s presentation at the New York “Upfronts,”





years been accused of micromanaging and second-guessing the decisions of the people they've hired, à la Steinbrenner. Last year Roy Disney, a former member of the board (and the nephew of the company's founder), tried to launch a shareholder revolt against Eisner. (Partly as a result, Eisner stepped down as chairman of the board in March, but retained his title as CEO.) More recently the company has had to fight off a hostile takeover bid from Comcast, the cable company. And in 2005 its profitable partnership with Pixar Animation, which made millions of dollars for Disney with movies such as *Toy Story* and *Finding Nemo*, will probably end—meaning that the success of ABC will be more important than ever. Within the Disney empire the pressure on Sweeney to revive ABC is enormous.

But the television environment Sweeney now confronts is tougher than what any of her predecessors faced, and perhaps tougher than anything a television executive has faced in the fifty years since the medium pervaded the American home. Even as recently as 1994 one could say that ABC was just a hit or two away from righting itself. That's no longer the case. In 1994 there were four networks—the Big Three

where networks preview their fall schedules for advertisers, Jimmy Kimmel, the man plucked to be ABC's late-night funnyman (after ABC infamously failed to land David Letterman in 2002), characterized his own network as "the fat kids who eat paste."

"You have a network that's collapsed," says Tom Wolzien, a senior media analyst with Sanford C. Bernstein & Company, an investment and research firm. "You have a network that has not delivered to advertisers, not delivered to its affiliates, and certainly has not delivered to its shareholders at Disney."

"Nobody's watching," Wolzien continues. "Actually, 'nobody' in this context is five to six million households. It's not like they've shut down and gone home. But fixing this is a multi-year project. I tell my clients, if you like the [Disney] stock, buy it for other reasons, but ABC should not be one of them."

ABC's struggles could not have come at a worse time for the men who head its corporate parent, the Walt Disney Company. Both Michael Eisner, Disney's chief executive officer, and Bob Iger, its chief operating officer, have over the

(CBS, NBC, and ABC) plus the fledgling Fox. Today there are six: WB and UPN have sprung up alongside what are now the Big Four. And the seemingly endless proliferation of cable channels—which Sweeney herself helped foster, in her previous capacities as an executive at Nickelodeon, FX, and the Disney Channel—has both balkanized television viewership and diluted the pool of executive and on-air talent available to the networks.

And yet in handing the keys to Sweeney, Disney may very well have settled not only the network's future but also that of television itself. Certainly it can be argued that in her present role she is the second most powerful woman in Hollywood, after Sherry Lansing, the president of Paramount Communications and the chairman of Paramount's Motion Picture Group. More important, Sweeney—if the Disney higher-ups follow through on what they promised her—has power over a multitude of channels and brands that will define Disney for the next century. What does the future hold for a broadcast company when Americans are increasingly drawn to cable rather than broadcast? What,

NICK UT/AF PHOTO

for that matter, is the future of television, now that the medium is changing in ways that nobody imagined? Mickey Mouse can't solve these problems for Disney. Michael Eisner and Bob Iger are hoping that Sweeney can.

"If they let her do her job, there's no question the network will be a success," Fred Silverman told me before I met with Sweeney. As the head of ABC's entertainment division from 1975 to 1978, Silverman steered the network to spectacular ratings with *Charlie's Angels* and *Starsky and Hutch*, among other shows. "And I think they will. If they won't let her alone, she'll leave. She won't put up with it."

"Rupert Murdoch was once quoted as saying she has a steel fist in a velvet glove," Silverman continued. "There's great resolve and strength there. You shouldn't let her appearance fool you. She knows what's wrong and what needs to be done."

Silverman's words resonate when I visit Sweeney in her sparse office on the tenth floor of the ABC building in Burbank. She is a fair, waiflike woman with dark blonde hair, and she speaks softly but with conviction. When she explains her thoughts about her job, her life, and television, it is in the patient and seemingly unflappable tone of an elementary school teacher. It stands to reason she would present herself this way—her mother is a retired elementary school teacher, and her father was an elementary school principal.

Alluding to the Disney higher-ups' history of keeping ABC executives on a short leash, I ask Sweeney if she really is the boss at ABC. "I am," she says plainly. "I read everything that you read," she continues, referring to newspaper coverage of the network's corporate foibles over the past decade. "But I wasn't here when all that was going on. My relationship with Bob [Iger] and Michael [Eisner] today is the same I had before I took over at ABC. I was comfortable soliciting their opinions, their advice. I'm very comfortable in the world of 'What do you think? I want to show you this early. I want to talk to you about this because I'm stuck.' That's the relationship I had with them before, and that's the relationship I have today."

Turning to the recent travails at ABC, Sweeney retains her equanimity. "Nobody loves being in fourth place," she says. "But there's something very motivating about the desire to get out of fourth. There is a level of commitment that feels good, and I think it comes from what we've been through and believing this network is better than fourth."

Taking over ABC is a sort of homecoming for Sweeney, who worked as a page for the network in the fall of 1978, while she was a student at the all-women College of New Rochelle. She worked on *Good Morning America* and *World News Tonight* and *The \$10,000 Pyramid*, whose grand prize actually meant something in the days before Regis Philbin started throwing seven figures around.

Growing up in Kingston, New York, Sweeney had always wanted to be a teacher. It was, after all, the family business. But she found she liked working in television. And so, after getting a master's degree in education at Harvard, she returned to New York, where in January of 1981 she landed an entry-level job with Nickelodeon, a new cable station that ran commercial-free children's programming.

"When she first came to me, she was supposed to be my assistant," says Geraldine Laybourne, then a manager at Nickelodeon and now the chairman and CEO of Oxygen Media. "She thought she could type eighty words a minute. In reality, she could type eight. Within a week I realized I needed to find another spot for her. It was the fastest promotion in the history of television."

**The television environment Sweeney now confronts is tougher than what any of her predecessors faced—and perhaps tougher than anything a television executive has faced in the history of the medium.**

It was easy to move Sweeney to a new position quickly, because in 1981 cable television was the Wild West—full of explorers who'd been shut out of the powerhouse networks and now found themselves alone on a plot of land with nothing to do but build a new life for themselves, not knowing if the rest of America would follow. Started as a collaboration between Warner Communications and American Express, Nickelodeon was quickly overshadowed by its higher-profile sister channel, MTV. (Today many pop-culture historians look back to "Video Killed the Radio Star," the first song to play as a music video on MTV, as having changed television forever.) But in many ways Nickelodeon was far more important than MTV. Nickelodeon sent executives like Sweeney out to schools, where they found a generation that had been talked down to for too many years and couldn't stomach another "after-school special" or another episode of *Scooby-Doo*. We (I count myself one of them) wanted something better, something



that understood our sense of humor, that didn't force-feed us Alvin and the Chipmunks. And soon, in Nickelodeon, we had it. We had it in the skits and in the green slime dumped on kids' heads on *You Can't Do That on Television*, and later in the messy exploits of the game show *Double Dare*.

"Nickelodeon had a show called *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*," Sweeney recalls. "And I had done the co-production on it. I walked into the family room and saw my son watching it, and I said, 'Oh, you're watching *Are You Afraid of the Dark?*' I sat down on the couch, and he said, 'Mom, you can't be here. This is kids-only weekend. This is the place only kids go,' and he chanted back all the things I had helped write. And I said, 'I have every right to be here! I did the financing on this!' And he said, 'What's financing?'"

During the 1980s and the early 1990s cable infiltrated millions of living rooms in America, bringing Nickelodeon along with it. By 1993 Geraldine Laybourne was in charge of the channel, and Sweeney had emerged as the head of Nickelodeon's international operations. During her negotiations to launch the channel in the United Kingdom, she drew the attention of Rupert Murdoch, whose BSkyB satellite system she was hoping to use for distribution. In 1993 Murdoch was not quite the driving media force in America that he is today. There was no Fox Sports Net carrying regional baseball in every market in the country. Fox News and Bill O'Reilly and "Fair and Balanced" were all a mere glimmer in his eye. But although he then owned no cable channels, he had during the preceding years cobbled together a group of independent local stations, supplied them with hours of original prime-time programming, including *21 Jump Street*, *The Simpsons*, and *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and declared the stations a network. Now it was time for the next step.

The morning following her husband's graduation from law school at Fordham in 1993, Sweeney got a call from Murdoch. He wanted to have lunch with her. Would she come? Within a few days Murdoch had asked her to start a new cable channel for him. Unlike the cable channels of the previous decade, it would be for the networks' audience—not kids or niche viewers but adults aged eighteen to forty-nine. It would have seven hours a day of live programming. A collectibles show. A pet show. Did she want in?

Sweeney left Nickelodeon a week later, and with only a desk and a chair and as yet no staff, she began to build the cable network. At first it was a very bad network. This was a long way from becoming the FX of *The Shield* and *Nip/Tuck*—daring, nearly R-rated shows for the viewer tired of *Law & Order*. But it was a network nonetheless. On June 1, 1994, FX debuted in 18 million cable-connected homes, the biggest launch in industry history.

Although not an early success by any conventional measure of programming quality, FX was important for cable, because it was one of the cornerstones of the medium's second generation—the one that brought ESPN2 and Home & Garden Television into our lives. If our collective viewing habits had been bent by the cable programming of the 1980s, they were sliced, diced, minced, chopped, and reprocessed into millions of pieces by the cable programming of the 1990s. And FX was important for Sweeney, because she'd shown that in a year's time she could take a concept, albeit a loony one, and give it form.

Sweeney's next job proved that she could take an existing—but struggling—cable network and make it a success. In 1996 the Disney Channel had for most of its history been a premium channel, like HBO—anyone wanting to watch it had to pay extra. Indeed, although the channel's modernized *Mickey Mouse Club* would, for what it's worth, launch the careers of both Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, its viewership was limited by the premium fee—which its programming gave no good reason to pay. Making Disney a premium channel served to funnel kids to Nickelodeon and, when they were old enough, to MTV.

That began to change in the early 1990s, when Disney started trying to place the channel in basic cable packages, and it changed further with a decision made by Michael Ovitz, whose brief and tumultuous tenure as Disney's president has become part of Hollywood lore. In 1996 Ovitz lured Geraldine Laybourne from Nickelodeon to head the Disney/ABC Cable Group. Shortly thereafter Laybourne called her former assistant Sweeney, at FX, to ask if she would head the Disney Channel and help rebuild its connection to kids—a connection that Laybourne and Sweeney had, ironically, spent all those years at Nickelodeon working to sever.

Sweeney brought her colleagues Eleo Hensleigh and Richard Ross with her to Disney. (They had both followed her from Nickelodeon to FX.) What they discovered when they arrived was a vision even more muddled than the one they had left behind at FX. There were concert specials with Travis Tritt and Boyz II Men. There were documentaries hosted by Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn. And for the kids? How about something called *Audubon's World of Animals*?

Sweeney and her team ultimately decided to develop a Disney Channel that was separate from the Disney brand. "This was like heresy," Hensleigh says. "We were just supposed to be the compliant partner, their outlet for covering all things Disney." The Disney Channel couldn't be Nickelodeon—because Nickelodeon, as demonstrated by Sweeney's own son, was for kids only. No, it had to be about families,

because that's what Disney stands for. But it would be what Sweeney deems "kid-driven family": programming that kids could watch and adults could stand. And driving that family would be girls aged nine to fourteen. The channel, Sweeney and company decided, would live or die with the "tween."

"We were doing focus groups, talking to kids about their lives, about what they watched," Sweeney says. "And what we were finding were kids who felt too old for Nickelodeon and too young for MTV. So there was this whole group that weren't little kids. But they certainly weren't full-blown teenagers either. It was homing in on the middle school experience. And I was living it at home. So I'm eternally grateful for *Even Stevens* and *Lizzie McGuire*."

It's not clear whose star rose faster—Hilary Duff's (Duff plays the channel's franchise character, Lizzie McGuire) or Sweeney's. When Laybourne left to start the Oxygen Network, Sweeney took over as head of the Disney/ABC Cable Group. In this role she flourished—and so, as a consequence, did the Disney Channel. Under Sweeney's stewardship it became the third-highest-rated cable channel in America, available in 84 million homes and producing \$500 million a year for the company. She also helped launch twenty-two international versions. In 2000 Sweeney launched SoapNet—the twenty-four-hour soap-opera station that ABC had been planning since before its merger with Disney. And last year she was given oversight of the ABC Family Channel, which the company had bought from Murdoch for \$5 billion in 2001, only to find itself saddled with a low-ranked channel that, because of a provision in its charter, is obligated to run daily episodes of Pat Robertson's religious program *The 700 Club* in perpetuity. During her tenure as Disney's cable chief, in short, Sweeney demonstrated the ability to make a moribund channel successful and proved again that she can effectively create a network from scratch.

But fixing ABC is a much bigger challenge than anything she did for the Disney cable group. Sweeney has shown an extraordinary ability to tap into what a kid, or even a tween, wants, but now she must find out what the eighteen-to-forty-nine set will watch—and not just watch but run home to watch.

"It's an enormous challenge for anyone," Fred Silverman told me. "It would be an enormous challenge for Superman and Batman and Catwoman all put together. She's walked into a mess."

"Michael and I would like to meet you tonight." That's how Sweeney's ABC adventure began. It was a Friday evening last March, and Sweeney was on the phone with Bob Iger when she heard him say those words. A few hours later, sitting in Eisner's office,

she was asked to take control of the broadcast network—in addition to, not instead of, her responsibilities as president of the ABC Cable Group and the Disney Channel. "Tell me more," she said.

Both men responded by talking about their own stints at ABC. Eisner was a top executive at the network before joining Disney, in 1984. Iger had been with ABC since 1974, working as a studio supervisor before moving over to ABC Sports and then on up the corporate ladder; in 1994 he became ABC's president and COO. They talked about how much they loved ABC, what it had done for them in their careers and as people, how it had helped shape their understanding of the media and the consumer.

But Sweeney had questions, which she asked over the following weeks. How did they think about news and daytime and prime time? What did they think about distribution? How would she manage these two disparate entities, cable and broadcast? What, precisely, did they see as ABC's future?

Eleo Hensleigh, by now ABC's executive vice-president for worldwide brand strategy, recalls walking through wintry New York streets in March with Sweeney, discussing these questions. Would Eisner and Iger really let Sweeney reinvent television, blurring the distinction between cable and broadcast? Or would she merely be the caretaker of two separate divisions?

Traditional broadcasters have always had a jaundiced view of cable executives, deeming them small-time (albeit sometimes profit-making) players who deliver only to the few, whereas the broadcast executives feed the masses. But at the Disney Channel, Sweeney laid the foundation for what she intends to do at ABC: find neglected viewers and create for them a philosophy of programming—a sensibility, or set of traits, that appeals to a broad swath of them and that runs through all of ABC's signature shows. And since her purview is more expansive than just the broadcast network, she intends to lead as many of these viewers as she can to the multitude of cable channels she also has at her command.

"Will they let you have the whole of television?" Hensleigh recalls asking her friend. Were they going to give her the authority?

"Clearly, she got that confirmation," Hensleigh says, "and she said yes."

"Are you going into my house?" Eva Longoria asks, standing in the driveway of her "home" on the Universal Studio lot.

"We're going into your house," replies Michael Edelstein, the executive producer of *Desperate Housewives*, the new ABC show in which Longoria stars.



"To see my Andy Warhol?" Longoria says. "Whose idea was that? That's fabulous."

In truth, it *is* a little fabulous: three ersatz Warhol portraits of Longoria lend verisimilitude to the interior of the house that her character, Gabrielle, a spoiled former model, inhabits on a mythical cul-de-sac called Wisteria Lane. You don't see much of this in Burbank anymore. Most of the backlots containing actual neighborhoods—with real houses where you could film a show like this—are gone. The same could be said of the show itself, which is about four women finding ways to comfort one another while at the same time plotting against their neighbors. It sometimes seems that every other TV drama today involves either finding a missing person or solving a crime using the fingerprints left on a matchbook.

Actually, *Desperate Housewives* is a throwback in many ways: it's a combination of *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, with a touch of the movie *American Beauty* thrown in. In the pilot's opening sequence the series' omniscient narrator blows her brains out. One character tries to kill her husband with a salad laced with onions (to which he's highly allergic)

**"It's an enormous challenge," Fred Silverman says of the job that confronts Sweeney. "It would be an enormous challenge for Superman and Batman and Catwoman all put together. She's walked into a mess."**

when he says he wants a divorce. Another character sneaks into the home of a neighbor, who she believes is sleeping with the new man on the block, only to accidentally light the house on fire. ABC has invested heavily in the show, in both production and marketing dollars.

The neighborhood seems real as we walk through it—the houses, the rosebushes, the suburban absence of sound. Longoria is the only cast member present as she rehearses a scene in which she tries to bribe a little girl who discovered her character having sex with the gardener.

"It's been a challenge," Edelstein says, as we sit in the ratan chairs on Gabrielle's porch. "How far do you go with a show like this? When do you pull back? When do you take a chance? It's really a challenge. In a strange way, I think it's where the network is at this moment."

"Les Moonves did not turn CBS around in a year," Edelstein continues, referring to the former actor who went on to become the highly effective CEO of CBS Television Network. "It probably took five years to make the network and

reshape it into what it's become. I always think that running a network is like steering a very, very big ship with a very small rudder, and you have to keep cranking on the wheel to have it come back around if it doesn't do that right away. If you can make one good show a year for five years, that will completely change the network. And it's hard to do that when you don't have people already there ready to watch."

As we talk, a couple of little girls sit looking bored. Edelstein explains that they're stand-ins for the actress who actually confronts Longoria's character. "Stunt girls," he says, looking at them through his sunglasses, his feet propped up on a glass table. "What a funny world we live in."

**A**lthough Sweeney now commands the ABC ship, the job of steering falls to Steve McPherson, whom Sweeney plucked from Touchstone Television (where he had developed *CSI* and *Scrubs* for ABC, only to see them go to other networks) to run ABC's prime-time entertainment division. It is McPherson who schedules the shows, and who looks for the hits around which to build the network.

What impressed Sweeney about McPherson, what led her to hire him, was his straightforwardness. He was willing to tell her what he liked and hated, and what he thought the problems were. Speaking to him as a reporter, one finds those same qualities: he owns up to envy of a show he's not involved with but wishes he were (*Survivor*); he speaks frankly about a show ABC put on the air last season that was too arty for its own good (*Line of Fire*, about

FBI agents trying to bring down a crime syndicate in Richmond, Virginia); and he openly criticizes ABC's biggest tactical mistake of the past decade (airing *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* four nights a week). Moreover, he understands, as Sweeney does, that what ails ABC will not be cured with a single show.

"You need to start small and start improving time periods," McPherson says, explaining his prime-time strategy. "You need to have an identifiable strength on your schedule—whether that's a specific night or it's a block of shows or it's a two-night period—and build out from there, as opposed to 'How do you get the overall rating of the network up tomorrow?'"

"I am a big admirer of Les Moonves and the way he built CBS," McPherson says. "It took years. He consistently stuck to his guns in terms of the creative he believed in. He had a consistency in his schedule; he used his breakout shows well but didn't overextend them. *Survivor* is a great example. It would have been easy for them at the time to say, 'Let's put *Survivor* on the air five times a week.' And

it would have been quick money. But it would have been incredibly destructive to their schedule. And there is a lesson in that: believe in the creative; be passionate about it; stick to your guns in terms of what your strategy is, and take the time to build shows appropriately, and don't go for the quick fix."

Sweeney and McPherson took over at what seemed an odd time—just before the network was to set its fall schedule, and only weeks before they would have to present it to advertisers in New York. "I thought it was very important to have the people who were presenting the fall schedule to the outside world—to the advertisers and shareholders, our public so to speak—be the people who would be responsible for it," Bob Iger told me. "It made no sense to have people presenting the schedule who were not going to be around to carry it out, even though there were elements of that schedule which were vestiges of a prior regime. I also wanted Anne and Steve to be part of the scheduling process, because even though it seems like trial by fire, I thought it was important for them to get that experience going into the job."

Trial by fire it has been: within a day of starting the job Sweeney was viewing the shows that would potentially represent ABC this fall. Scheduling came next, followed by the "Upfronts" in New York. Then there was a five-year-plan meeting and a meeting in Anaheim with ABC affiliates, the vast majority of which are owned by companies other than Disney.

During the latter meeting Sweeney faced tough questions from a group of broadcasters whose revenues are dependent on how the national network does; they were understandably unhappy about ABC's poor ratings. "The four, five, six, and eleven o'clock newscasts are our main focus," Deb McDermott, the president of Young Broadcasting and the chair of the ABC Television Affiliate Board of Governors, told me. "That's what we do locally, where we sell our advertising, and [network] prime time has a huge impact on that."

McDermott says she was impressed with Sweeney's poise during her presentation to the affiliates in Anaheim. What impressed her more, though, was the speed with which Sweeney helped the news division launch the experimental ABC News Now: fourteen weeks of around-the-clock coverage of the presidential campaign, including both party conventions and election night. The network offers this twenty-four-hour news channel to its affiliates and cable systems.

Over coffee in his Washington office the week after the Democratic National Convention, David Westin, the head of ABC's News Division, told me, "When we proposed what became ABC News Now, which I like to think of as our foray

into the future, Anne could understand that immediately, could embrace it. But even more than that, she could ask for assistance from people who deal with cable mostly, who work for [the Disney-owned] ESPN and Disney Channel. She could cross over that line. Whereas in the old world the television network was on one side of it, and the cable was on the other. She can cross over. She's well positioned that way. She has the training and the expertise and she has the jurisdiction—she can break down some of the walls and think creatively how programming can be distributed across various media, not just one."

That's evident a few weeks later, during a teleconference that Sweeney leads in late August. As she sits with her people in Los Angeles, and Westin sits with his people in New York, they talk about what worked and what didn't on ABC News Now's maiden voyage, during the convention in Boston, and about how the medium gave Peter Jennings a chance to relax in the same way that Diane Sawyer seemed to relax when she went to *Good Morning America*. They also talk about the enthusiasm of the junior talent for the opportunity to strut their stuff, albeit briefly, on ABC News Now.

Then Sweeney says, "The more we talk about this, the less I think about how this is distributed and the more I realize there's been such a blurring of cable and broadcast. Instead of a world where we're constantly tailoring to these groups, they're all interested in some of the things we've talked about at the table today. They're all interested in the technology we're using or the response of the talent or the things we're going to use in New York [at the Republican convention]. It's almost like it turned into one world we need to get to and, in fact, we're going there."

"Well," Westin says, looking at her on a flat-screen panel from the other side of the country, "that's the world we need to get to, there's no question about that."

But what *is* that world, exactly? And what is ABC, now that it is no longer one third of what Robert Thompson, the director of Syracuse University's Center for the Study of Popular Television, calls "the vase of American television"—now that it is instead only one of the hundreds of shards produced when people like Sweeney helped shove that vase from its shelf? And what, for that matter, is the fate of advertiser-driven networks generally, now that we have technologies like TiVo and On Demand, which are designed to let viewers avoid commercials entirely?

"Advertising is already evolving along with the way people receive television," Sweeney says when I ask her about this. "So I'm not really afraid of this." One possible solution Sweeney sees to the TiVo problem is a return to television's early days, when shows like *The Texaco Star Theater*, *Kraft*



*Television Theater*, and *The Colgate Comedy Hour* had their sponsors woven into the fabric of the program, not fractured into thirty-second spot advertisements. Sponsorships and product placements may be the future of television advertising. "We hit that moment in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*," she says, "where they say, 'Six Kenmore appliances, twenty-six Craftsman tools, one happy family' every Sunday. It's so beautifully integrated, and sends such a message out for Sears, but it is so integral with what we're doing with that show, that it feels like a win-win."

Nothing seems to rattle Sweeney. While she was making her introductory remarks at the network's summer press tour in July, standing between two large video screens showing the logos of all the networks she was responsible for, the logos suddenly vanished and, unaccountably, were replaced by a scene from FX's *Nip/Tuck*, in which a woman wearing only a black lace bra and panties holds a knife up to a plastic surgeon, whom she has tied to a bed.

"Some of my new friends," Sweeney said calmly when she caught sight of the scene out of the corner of her eye. "And none of them appearing on the Disney-ABC Television group of networks."

"I never see her stressed out," says her friend Maria Shriver, the first lady of California. "I never see her snap at anyone, never see her wear her job. She's unbelievably even-keeled."

"I have trouble watching this one," Sweeney says, as we watch a trailer for *Lost*, an upcoming ABC show about plane-crash survivors trapped on an island. In the first few seconds we see a scene of the back of a plane ripping off and then a shot of the stranded passengers surveying the wreckage around them as one of them says, "We're a thousand miles off course. They're looking for us in the wrong place."

The day before, Disney had announced its third-quarter earnings, declaring a 20 percent increase in profits over the same period last year, largely owing to an increase in revenues from the company's theme parks and ESPN. In a conference call with industry analysts Bob Iger said the company was "hopeful and expectant that our new management team at ABC will take us back up to first or second in ratings over time."

When I relay these comments to Sweeney, she says, "We all have our moments when we're in the cellar. But there's a lot of satisfaction in getting back up." And then, lowering her voice to a sharp whisper, she says, "And that's where I'm going. I'm not staying down here. No. Definitely not." ■

*Sridhar Pappu is an Atlantic correspondent. His profile of Eliot Spitzer, "The Crusader," appeared in the October issue.*

## It's Lonely at the Top

*"Hello, my name is Joe. I am a CEO, and I am learning to listen and validate those around me." How executive coaching, philanthropic advising, and other specialized services help the modern—and newly self-examining—CEO get through the day*

BY RACHEL DONADIO

Rachel Bellow, a consultant and executive coach based in Manhattan, is describing the calendar of a chief executive officer that she recently saw. "There was no white space seven days a week, not even Saturdays and Sundays," she tells me, her voice filled with a combination of awe and horror. "He was all over the place on his private jet. Because he wasn't tied to commercial airline schedules, he did everything. He would go to nine different cities in a single twenty-four-hour period." On weekends, she says, the meetings took on a "personal flavor," but they were still work. "He may have had two golf outings, but they weren't in the same city! It was obscene! There is no possible way that this person ever has the capacity to process what he's doing."

This is the situation of the contemporary CEO: work has crept into every available corner of experience. In a way, CEOs are like professional cyclists—champions in a team sport with individual winners. And just as a cyclist requires a whole entourage—coaches and trainers, *soigneurs* and nutritionists—to make it through the Tour de France performing at top speed, CEOs rely on speechwriters, social secretaries, private bankers, philanthropic advisers, chiefs of staff, highly trained administrative assistants, and chefs—plus faxes and cell phones, and BlackBerries for constant e-mail access, not to mention private jets and armored limousines. To some, all this may come across as remarkably indulgent; but if you're a member of the corporation's board of directors, or one of its shareholders, and you calculate the CEO's hourly rate, you probably don't want him wasting valuable time waiting for connecting flights or on hold with Ticketmaster. "The glamour associated with CEO life, the fancy jets and hotels—much of that is just a way of keeping the individual alive, given the intense stress of their jobs," says Stratford Sherman, the senior vice-president of Executive Coaching Network, in Connecticut. "It's not as if these people are sipping champagne at thirty

thousand feet with their feet up. Some do, but it really isn't the norm. The norm is not to have any time."

The more CEOs work and the more responsibilities they take on, the more isolated they become. Their entourages shield them from workaday headaches. Their spot at the top cuts them off from the people lower down on the corporate totem pole, and thus from reliable, "un-spun" information. Everyone reporting to them has his own ambitions; everyone wants to look good; everyone wants a promotion.

So what's a CEO to do? Why, get more help, of course! Isolation and lack of time to think may be the bane of every CEO's existence, but for the burgeoning field of executive coaches, it's nothing less than a growth market. No single definition can capture what every executive coach does. But most coaches who work with CEOs seem to be part confessor, part behavioral therapist, and part management consultant. And all coaches will tell you that unlike the members of the "C-suite"—the chief financial officer, the chief information officer, the corporate counsel, and so forth—on whom the CEO relies, they aren't angling for his job, they have no vested interest in the company, and they will come in with a fresh perspective. At a very high cost, of course. A top coach will charge each client several hundred thousand dollars a year for bespoke guidance and support—highly personalized counseling, not just the standard stuff you'd learn from reading *Management for Dummies*.

CEO coaching comes in many varieties. One is aimed at helping the executive hop off the treadmill long enough to think. "Coaching is a way to have an outboard processor, someone who's helping you process your own experience, which is just coming at you too fast and too furiously," Bellow says. Call this "outsourcing your self-reflection"—bringing in help to do the kinds of thinking you might not have time to do on your own (Was I too hard on my CFO at the corporate retreat?), or would prefer not to (Was it because he reminds me of the bully from my junior high school?).

Other coaches call themselves "third opinion advisers." They focus as much on the larger problems facing an organization as on the behavior of its top leadership. "A CEO must figure out what to do despite great uncertainty, great risk, and incomplete information," says one strategic adviser, Saj-nicole Joni, a former executive at Microsoft and the author of *The Third Opinion: How Successful Leaders Use Outside Insight to Create Superior Results* (2004). "And then he has to get it done through a large, large number of people, most of whom he doesn't have direct control over. That's what leadership is. That's what the job is." Joni's approach is to do extensive homework on a company and then work with a CEO for half

a day once a month or so, to help bounce around ideas when the executive is facing major decisions. "At the end of the day CEOs are alone ultimately in final responsibility," she says. "They mustn't be isolated in their thinking. They need to get the very different perspectives from inside and outside." You can call what she offers "perspective for hire."

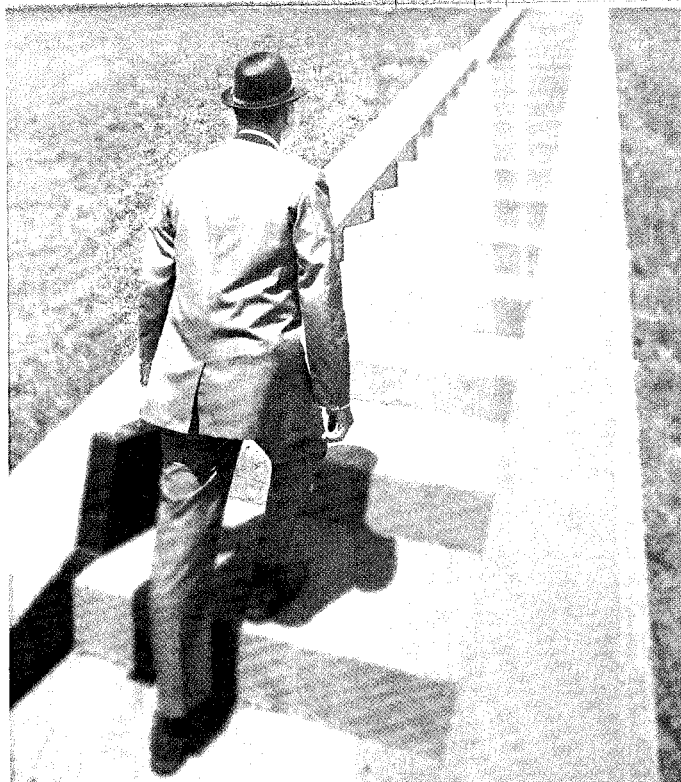
Then there's the coach as imported truth-teller. "Part of the dynamic with the CEO is perhaps that the coach speaks more frankly than anyone else in his life," says Gary Ranker, a former CEO who has been identified by *Forbes* as one of the top five coaches in America, and who uses an "interpersonal" approach to resolving conflict within businesses. After working with an executive for an intensive initial period of six to nine months, Ranker, who is based in Manhattan, will stay on retainer and serve as a "first response" person. Much of his time is spent helping CEOs "with their own development in social interaction, awareness, and skills," he says. "The person at the top is insulated. Everyone they have contact with has an agenda."

**A champion athlete just has to win; the modern executive has to *validate* those around him. Which is why some companies will pay hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to teach their CEOs to play well with others.**

Ranker speaks in a low, soothing voice, and when thinking he sometimes clasps his hands together between his knees, as if in prayer. You get the sense that he is listening not only to every word you utter but also to the silences between the words. After about fifteen minutes in his company, you feel that you could tell him anything—that your marriage is on the rocks, that you think you screwed up on restructuring the Asian divisions, that you envy your cracker-jack new vice-president for sales (she went to Harvard Law School, and you didn't get in).

Ranker was the CEO of Hallmark Germany, among other companies, before going back to school for a Ph.D. in human organizational development and embarking on a career as a coach. His first client was a nuclear engineer who had been promoted to run a division of a major Fortune 500 company. The engineer had come from the Navy, and his management approach left something to be desired in the civilian world. He led through fear and intimidation; his





staff was terrified of him. "They were beginning to bolt," Ranker recalls. "I spent a year with him. Nobody thought he could ever change." They were wrong, apparently. "He had a conversion, and it was very evident." (After hearing Ranker use words like "conversion," "miracle," and "see the light" to describe some of his toughest cases, I ask him if he sees his work in religious terms. "No," he says emphatically.) These days Ranker works mostly in the financial-services industry, where he deals largely with executives who have shot quickly to the top and aren't used to considering the effects of their actions on other people. He says he helps CEOs "so that their relationships are more positive" and so that their colleagues "experience more validation." Herein lies a striking difference between the CEO and the champion athlete: the athlete just has to win; the modern executive has to *validate* those around him. Which is why some companies will pay an executive coach hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to teach their CEOs daily decency, or to help them learn to play well with others.

The whole enterprise of CEO coaching and the system that supports it is profoundly American in the way that it combines a ferocious work ethic with earnest self-scrutiny, an openness to self-improvement, and a fundamental anxiety about power. After all, self-improvement is an American tradition that runs from Benjamin Franklin's chart for systematically strengthening his virtues and scaling back his vices ("Like him who having a Garden to weed, does not attempt to eradicate all the bad Herbs at once, which would exceed his Reach and his Strength, but works on one of the Beds at a time," as Franklin wrote in his *Autobiography*) to the young James Gatz's lists in the margins of his copy of *Hopalong Cassidy* ("Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling, 6.15–6.30 ... Study electricity, etc. 7.15–8.15 ... Practice elocution, poise

and how to attain it, 5.00–6.00") on his way to transforming himself, through sheer force of will, into Jay Gatsby.

But CEO coaching goes beyond this. It's the marriage of psychoanalytic and twelve-step culture with bottom-line thinking: If I don't acknowledge my failings and change, my company will suffer. Even if it's framed in the language of moral improvement, coaching is ultimately about profit, not just about helping someone become a better human being. A company hiring a CEO coach needs to justify the decision's "pragmatic effect on the bottom line," as Gary Ranker explains. The expectation is that with the help of a CEO coach people will work more effectively, Ranker says. It's a view of human nature as optimistic as it is cruel; it's not just that you can change but that you *have to* change if you want to keep the company running smoothly (that is, turning profits) and hold on to your job. Coaching culture is also shot through with something of a Christian trope, in that the highest are made humble—or at least play at being humble for effect.

Even if it's in spirit more than in practice, what separates today's executives from their antecedents—be they robber barons, southern slave owners, the landed aristocracy of Europe, or the peers of the British Empire—is that self-examination is now part of the job description. Ours is the most overtly self-scrutinizing ruling class in history. We live in a culture in which the ultimate sign of power—the ultimate status symbol—is to be able to reveal your limitations openly and accept help. Hello, my name is Joe. I am a CEO, and I am learning to listen and validate those around me.

Unless they've always been expected to assume a place in a family-run company, most CEOs have traveled a long way to get to the top, and have had to change their lives repeatedly in both visible and almost imperceptible ways. Maybe a CEO got his start at a good, solid meat-and-potatoes insurance company, where he landed straight out of state college. It was the kind of place where they would take the new hires up to the executive dining room, show them the bone china, the mahogany sideboards, and the Currier & Ives prints, and say, "Someday, all this could be yours, son." Now, thirty years later, our former insurance executive may find himself at the top of a major Wall Street firm, the poshest of the posh. Here, even though money is the air he breathes, decorum dictates that it's impolite—crass, even—to discuss it. It must be very confusing, all this—learning to play up his limited wealth when he was on the rise, and to play down his extraordinary wealth now that he's really made it. Maybe when he was named to his new post they moved him to the top floor and gave him an office

with a wall of windows and a breathtaking view of New York Harbor. Sitting at his dark wooden desk he can watch the tugboats forge their weekday way under the Brooklyn Bridge and the sailboats glide by on weekends, while the cars speeding past on the FDR Drive, thirty stories below, keep time with the ticker symbols racing across his screen. He has a private conference room, a private workout room, an office with plush sofas; his assistant chose the upholstery, and the art from the corporate collection to match it. He isn't much interested in art, but he's on the board of a nonprofit that helps inner-city kids get into college. Now, *that's* something he can understand.

Indeed, if you make it to the top executive level, chances are the company's philanthropic advisers will help you find a cause you believe in. After all, serving on boards isn't just altruistic—it's an essential part of the CEO's public persona. A company's leaders might tell an executive to start networking more broadly among other movers and shakers and find a charitable organization that has the right kind of board members. According to Rachel Bellow, "More and more CEOs and companies recognize the value of nonprofit philanthropic activities to their core business. It's very clear, especially in a business like investment banking, where firms like Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs are all showing up to the client with the same numbers, the same black book. The only differentiating factor is 'I know you're on the board of the Boston Symphony with my wife.' It's an end run around the direct business relationship. Boards of not-for-profits are replete with high-power executives, and it's a way of gaining access indirectly."

Of course, it's bad form to run the nonprofit into the ground while you're busy schmoozing at benefit dinners with the guy you want to take your company public. "Philanthropy, especially if it means board positions, has an enormous responsibility attached," says Fred Schroeder, the executive vice-president and co-founder of the well-respected corporate communications and marketing firm Resnicow Schroeder, who has advised companies including Ford and Altria on corporate philanthropy. "It brings the opportunity for networking, or social position, or prominence, or visibility with opinion leaders or people who may be able to influence your business," he says. But, Schroeder points out, a board member who thinks only about what the nonprofit can do for him, as opposed to what it expects of him, risks damaging the nonprofit—not to mention his own image.

So what kind of public image does a CEO want to cultivate, anyway? That's a question a whole host of consultants would be delighted to help answer, including image consultants and corporate speechwriters and advisers on

what PR people call "messaging"—that is, figuring out what point the CEO wants to make and how he can make it most effectively. Some consulting outfits will act like a CEO's personal Bob Shrum and treat him like a politician, refining his message and tailoring his public speaking to fit his speech patterns. This is a growing market because it's good to keep your company's name in the right dinner-party conversations (assuming, of course, it's not because you've been indicted). "People realize that with senior management and CEOs becoming celebrities, a high profile can enhance your corporate value," says Sunny Bates, who runs a high-end consulting and head-hunting company in Manhattan. "It's an investment you make to affect your bottom line."

But the greater the CEO's visibility, the more he needs to worry about security threats. And this, of course, requires a different kind of adviser. If a CEO lands on the cover of *Forbes*, he'll probably get a visit from the head of corporate security, who may suggest a one-on-one with an outside consultant—someone like Tim Horner, a former New York policeman who now works with executives and other "high-net-worth individuals" for a leading security and corporate investigation firm, Kroll, Inc. Before meeting with a client, Horner does a lot of homework. He'll find out all the relevant facts about the business: Is it heavily invested in fields that tend to generate protests, by environmentalists or other activists? Is the executive traveling to high-risk countries? Horner will also find out everything he can about an executive's life: what the traffic patterns are around his ex-wife's beach house; where the kids from his second marriage take piano lessons; what time of day his brother's son, the one who got kicked out of prep school for drugs, tends to show up at the executive's country house with his no-good friends. (Horner says "crazy-nephew syndrome" can be more of a threat to some CEOs than violent protesters, foreign terrorists, or corporate spies.)

A good security expert will know if an executive hasn't changed the locks on the one-bedroom he's kept on upper Park Avenue since the early 1980s, where he had all those *cinq-à-septs* that ruined his first marriage. The security guy will know everything about the CEO's house—including how easy it is to break into the safe hidden behind that mediocre Hudson River School painting his second wife was fleeced on at an auction last year. He'll know that the CEO is barely ever there, that he's usually at the office or traveling, and maybe even that when he comes home and kisses the wife and kids, he'll say, "Sorry I've been out of town so much lately. I know it makes you crazy. But I'm working with a coach and I'm trying to change." ■

Rachel Donadio is a reporter for The New York Observer.



## TOUCH & GO

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### A SNAP QUIZ IN BODY LANGUAGE

We can't hear what they're saying, but that man  
Is holding that woman in his arms. Your assignment  
Is to deduce their thoughts from what they do.  
They've left no apparent space between their bodies.  
It could be called a close embrace, but notice:  
Her arms are at her sides, her hands relaxed,  
Her face impassive, while he's whispering  
Something in her ear. His upper torso  
Is tilted slightly forward. Hers is yielding,  
But not in a way suggesting sweet surrender.  
Is this a seduction scene? Is she being held  
For questioning? Should she call a lawyer?  
He's looking into her eyes now. How wide open  
Would you say hers are? What does he see in them?  
If he were to let her go, class, what would she do?

—DAVID WAGONER

### SINNERS WELCOME

I opened up my shirt to show this man  
the flaming heart he lit in me, and I was scooped up  
like a lamb and carried to the dim warm.  
I who should have been kneeling  
was knelt to by one whose face  
should be emblazoned on every coin and diadem:

no bare-chested boy, but Ulysses,  
with arms thick from the hard-hauled ropes.  
He'd sailed past the clay gods  
and the singing girls who might have made of him

a swine. That the world could arrive at me  
with him in it, after so much longing—  
impossible. He enters me and joy  
sprouts from us as from a split seed.

—MARY KARR

### LIPSTICK

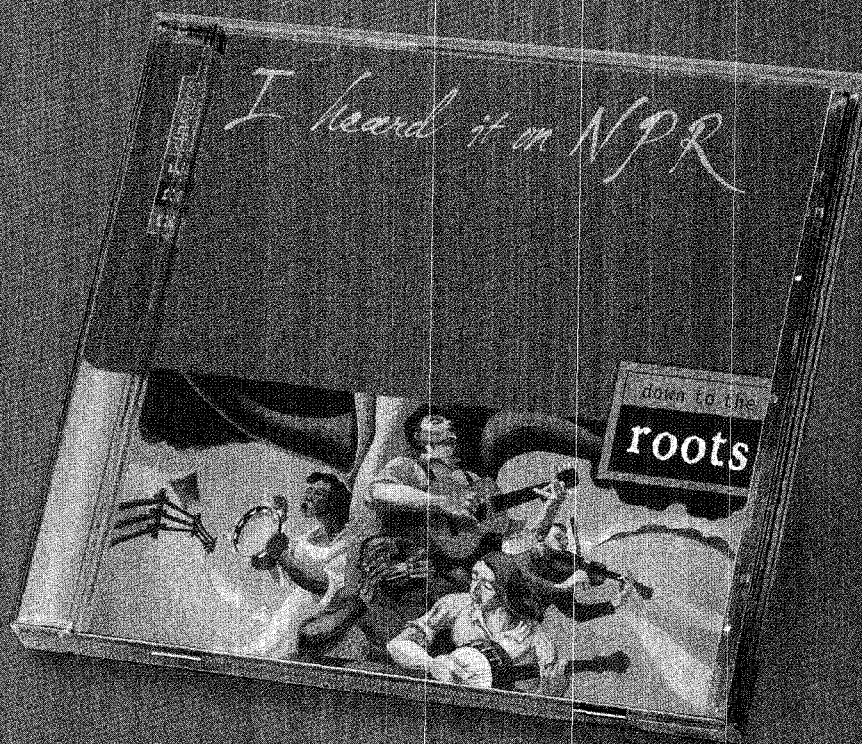
She leaned over the sink,  
her weight on her toes,  
and applied lipstick  
in quick certain strokes,  
the way a man signs  
his hundredth autograph  
of the morning.  
She tested a convictionless smile  
as the lipstick retracted  
like a red eel.  
All day she left her mark  
on everything she kissed,  
even the air,  
like intoxicating news  
whispered from ear to ear:  
*He left it all to me.*

—CONNIE WANEK

*David Wagoner's most recent collections of poems are Travelling Light (1999) and The House of Song (2002). Wagoner teaches at the University of Washington. Connie Wanek lives in Duluth, Minnesota, and is the author of two books of poems, Bonfire (1997) and Hartley Field (2002). Mary Karr is the author of the memoirs The Liar's Club (1995) and Cherry (2000). Her most recent book of poems is Viper Rum (2001).*



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# BOOKS & CRITICS

NOVEMBER 2004 | THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

## THIS MONTH:

### **The Honorable Schoolboy**

"It's quite impossible that the man who had invented Sir Roderick Spode in 1938 was prey to any covert sympathy for fascism," Christopher Hitchens writes in a review of Robert McCrum's *Wodehouse: A Life*.

PAGE 136

### **Fatherland**

"*Portnoy's Complaint* is a trick car out of which, instead of a family of dwarfs, novels climb one after another, at an astonishing rate and seemingly without end." This new novel was in there too, writes Clive James, reviewing Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America*, in which what concerns Roth "is the notion of an America with its traditional anti-Semitic prejudices given official endorsement."

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### **You Oughtta Be in Pictures**

A reading list of great novels improved (in some specific way) by their screen versions, by Lorrie Moore

PAGE 149

### **The Prime of Ms. Muriel Spark**

James Wood finds that *The Finishing School*, Muriel Spark's latest novel, "sheds an interesting if pale retrospective light on this wonderful writer's best book": *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*.

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## EDITOR'S CHOICE

# **The South in Black and White**

*What to read this month*

BY BENJAMIN SCHWARZ

American readers have long had an obsessive hunger for the South. Their urge to comprehend it and writers' compulsion to explain it have generated a vast subfield of American letters over the past century and a half. Even leaving aside the southern novelists, poets, and story writers, every few years since the 1850s a major book has been published that explores, praises, or condemns the region the historian David Potter called "a kind of sphinx on the American land." No American works of sociology outshine the classic studies of southern life by John Dollard, Hortense Powdermaker, and Arthur Raper. Few memoirs are as haunting as William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee* or Ben Robertson's *Red Hills and Cotton*. No cultural portraits or commentaries have been more influential than James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, W.E.B. DuBois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. J. Cash's *The Mind of the South*, and *I'll Take My Stand*, by "Twelve Southerners." But surpassing all these are the works of history that the region has inspired, which are quite simply the flower of American historical scholarship. With Eugene D. Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and C. Vann Woodward's *The Origins of the New South* at the top of the list, the bibliography of southern history is as dazzling as it is lengthy. But alas, since the 1980s southern historical writing—with the notable exception of Edward Ayers's *The Promise of the New South* and a few others—has succumbed to the noisome trends infecting other areas of humanities scholarship. The historians say more and more about less and less. And they say it badly. Moreover, although they've been an especially politically engaged lot since the 1950s, recently they've too mechanically followed the politically correct line. This isn't surprising: if any region of the country could be defined by its struggles over that PC triumvirate, race, class, and gender, it's the South. But the result has been too many books that read like little more than self-satisfied indictments of the racist past—an easy and obvious target. Two important titles



published this season, however, present fresh and especially nuanced views of the South's anguished and ambiguous history, and of the ambivalence at the heart of history and in the heart of man.

When the young historian Mark Schultz ventured to Hancock County, in Georgia's lower Piedmont, to collect oral reminiscences of the intersection of black and white lives in the first half of the twentieth century (primarily the 1910s through the 1930s), he expected to gather a record of unrelentingly brutal oppression and a rigid color line. His actual findings, presented in **The Rural Face of White Supremacy** (Illinois), an unusually rich and dense portrait (as much a work of sociology as of history), have led him to draw a far more complex and subtle picture. To be sure, Schultz found abundant evidence of a white-supremacist society (one ultimately upheld by violence, and in which blacks who found themselves in unfamiliar circumstances had constantly to negotiate the convolutions of racial etiquette). But in this rural setting he failed to find the formal segregation that characterized black-white relations in the South's cities. Instead he discovered a world defined by what he calls "a web of interconnectivity," in which blacks and whites (especially in the lower classes) regularly attended one another's churches; played ball, fished, hunted, and ate together as neighbors; chatted and spun yarns together, visited one another's homes, and helped and consoled one another in times of sickness and death. ("[You could] act like you were of the same family with close white sharecroppers," one black sharecropper remembered.) In short, in this shared culture the races were intensely intimate—and their interactions were usually characterized by decency and good manners—if never equal. Although Schultz scrupulously eschews romanticizing what Martin Luther King Jr. called the "intimacy of life" between rural blacks and whites, his work corrects some of the best-publicized recent chronicles of southern life in this period, which too often treat white racial attitudes and behavior as a static and monolithic force. Those books also too easily assume that

because by today's standards nearly all white southerners were racist, there's no point in distinguishing among their "racist" attitudes. A black sharecropper visiting a strange town in rural Arkansas, for instance, would care whether its sheriff opposed equal rights for blacks but favored some protection for them (however inadequate to modern sensibilities), or whether he was a virulent racist who would deny blacks the most basic rights and, indeed, would encourage threats to their lives and property. Although both sorts of white men may be reprehensible, both lived throughout the South, and the difference between them could mean life or death for a black man.

Schultz's compelling, detailed account illuminates the basic fact of southern history: the two races have always been inextricably bound together. W. J. Cash recognized this in his classic 1941 analysis of the southern mind ("Negro entered into white man as profoundly as white man entered into Negro—subtly influencing every gesture, every word, every emotion and idea, every attitude"), but he failed to develop what was at the time a scandalous argument. More recently historians such as John Boles and Mechal Sobel (who've revealed the biracial nature of antebellum southern evangelicalism) examined aspects of southern interracial history in detail. But Schultz's book and Melvin Patrick Ely's **Israel on the Appomattox** (Knopf) are the first works that attempt to describe with precision the texture of day-to-day interaction across the color line. Ely, a historian at William and Mary, has unearthed a remarkably rich story. In 1796 Richard Randolph, Thomas Jefferson's cousin, manumitted his ninety slaves and settled them on land he owned, which they christened "Israel Hill," in Prince Edward County, Virginia. In a creative and exhaustive feat of archival research, Ely scrutinizes this group's relationship with the white community and, more generally, the relationship between blacks—free and slave—and whites throughout the county from the end of the eighteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth. He

reveals both the callousness and the closeness of the relationship between whites and slaves, a relationship at bottom based on unlimited force, but in which whites saw slaves "as distinct individuals—complex, diverse human beings," and from which could grow "affection and sympathy." More surprising, he finds that "tolerant, sometimes friendly relations" linked whites and free blacks, two groups that worked side by side for equal wages and were united by a common culture, elaborate and usually trusting business dealings, and intensely close religious ties. In 1897—during the bloodiest and most repressive period of race relations in American history—DuBois, who spent the summer studying the black communities in the county, found "economic interdependence of the two races, which promises much in the way of mutual forbearance and understanding." Like Schultz, Ely doesn't ignore the pervasive ideology of white supremacy, but in carefully analyzing day-to-day life, he finds that ideology failed to govern relationships between and attitudes toward individuals, and that "white folk in Prince Edward County, like people in other societies, valued good neighbors and esteemed good behavior"—even as he notes that daily civility, respect, and affection between free blacks and whites failed to end the institution of slavery or to replace the Jim Crow system. (Indeed, he speculates, "the very friendliness that could arise between members of the dominant group and the oppressed may have postponed change by encouraging white people to see their social system as less abusive than it was in fact.")

It would be an injustice to regard either of these books as soft-pedaling the white South's racist past. Rather, both accentuate the biracial—and tragic—aspects of southern history. Even during the South's most venomously racist period, Booker T. Washington claimed that wherever he traveled in the region, he could find "at least one white man who believed implicitly in one Negro, and one Negro who believed implicitly in one white man." That observation shouldn't surprise us. Of course southern blacks





**Picturing Faith**, by Colleen McDannell (Yale). During the Depression the Farm Security Administration dispatched a band of photographers including Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans to document various facets of rural existence. This striking book, with its lengthy and intelligent (if at times overly interpretive) text by the historian of religion Colleen McDannell, collects the FSA photos of rural religious culture. Traveling throughout Dixie in 1930, the English writer William Archer observed that "the South is by a long way the most simply and sincerely religious country that I ever was in," so it's not surprising that FSA photographers took more pictures of religious expression there than they did in any other region. What is surprising is that in a time in which, as McDannell writes, "a crushingly critical image" of evangelical Christianity prevailed, these northern, liberal, and secular photographers recorded southern evangelicalism with such sympathy,

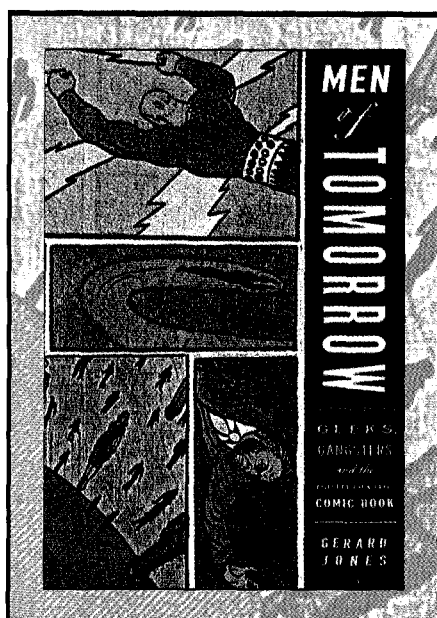


even admiration. They captured both its stark inwardness (conveyed, for instance, in the many pictures of the remote, famously austere wooden

frame churches that all the photographers were moved to take) and the ways in which it was integrated into and nurtured community life.

TOP: DOROTHEA LANGE. BOTTOM: MARION POST (WOLCOTT)





**"The fascinating and heartbreaking** true story of the goniffs, shmendricks, and shlemiels who gave birth to the superhero comics—written with all the **verve and velocity** of a golden age comic book."

—Art Spiegelman  
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and whites had intricately and indelibly marked each other in centuries of living together. The interchange of the races has given birth to nearly every distinctive aspect of southern life—accent and food, music, the style and spirit of southern Protestantism, even the word "Dixie." Southerners' famed courtesy and manners, qualities that, as Ayers writes, are "perhaps the most tangible evidence of a Southern upbringing," developed, scholars concur, from the fusion of black and white attitudes. An intense attachment to the land, a strong folk culture, and an adherence to evangelical Christianity are quintessentially "southern" qualities—but that being so, "there is no one more quintessentially Southern," as Woodward wrote, "than the Southern Negro." Nevertheless, for 300 years the structure of southern economic and political life denied this kinship. Those humane relationships and feelings of affection and sympathy to which Washington referred, and which Schultz and Ely elucidate, were invariably constrained and distorted—and often destroyed. By insisting that the two races divorce themselves from each other, southern whites ensured that both blacks and whites would lose an integral part of themselves. DuBois probably best defined the torment of the white southerner (and one of the tragedies at the center of southern life): "Deeply religious and intensely democratic as are the mass of whites, they feel acutely the false position in which the Negro problems place them. Such an essentially honest-hearted and generous people cannot cite the caste-leveling precepts of Christianity, or believe in equality of opportunity for all men, without coming to feel more and more with each generation that the present drawing of the color-line is a flat contradiction to their beliefs and professions."

**Conjectures of Order**, by Michael O'Brien (North Carolina). Thank God for university presses. What other kind of publisher would ever produce this hugely ambitious, sweeping yet recondite, keenly intelligent but often wrongheaded two-volume, 1,354-page

history of intellectual life in the American South from 1810 to 1860? O'Brien has written on southern writers and thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s, but has mostly concentrated on antebellum southern intellectuals, especially South Carolinians. An American historian at Cambridge, he's probably the most prolific scholar of southern intellectual history (a field that Yankees with a little learning incorrectly label an oxymoron). Though these volumes sound narrow, they're in fact breathtakingly grand. The writers, critics, economists, political theoreticians, theologians, philosophers, linguists, poets, sociologists, historians, jurists, and scholars assessed herein were the most cosmopolitan, highly educated, and intellectually capable group the United States produced from the Revolution to the Civil War, and O'Brien's is as much a history of the society that formed them (although he carefully points out how imperfectly their views mirrored that society) as it is a history of the (often highly abstract) ideas they engendered. He's especially careful to place these southerners in the context of European intellectual trends (they were probably the most well-traveled Americans, at home in Edinburgh, London, Paris, and Göttingen—"to most southerners Madame de Staël mattered more than Ralph Waldo Emerson"), and he finds them "deeply implicated in modernity," an interpretation that's true as far as it goes, but that, I find, takes him in some wrong directions, especially concerning the theoretical arguments surrounding the defense of slavery. But although often stilted, this work is unusually astute (see O'Brien's analysis of John Taylor's political thought, and his chapters on the growth of the historical imagination and on southern thinkers' inventive assimilation of classical economics) and intellectually creative (see his lengthy and appropriately discursive chapter on the role of conversation in intellectual life). This is a work of lasting significance—it will (eventually) alter and widen our conceptions of the antebellum United States and of the currents of American thought. ▀

*Benjamin Schwarz is the literary editor and national editor of The Atlantic.*



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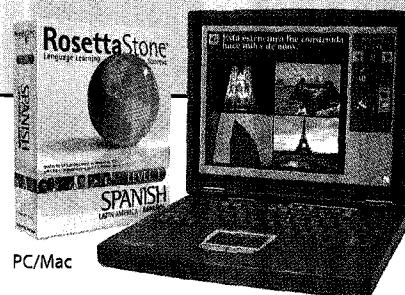
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## BOOKS

# The Honorable Schoolboy

*P. G. Wodehouse was a very advanced case of arrested development. Lucky for us*

BY CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

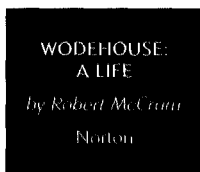
I daresay that one can claim, without running overmuch risk of contradiction, to have been reading Frederick Taylor's recent history of the obliteration of Dresden with no intention of looking for laughs. And yet when I reached page 46, I found myself open-mouthed with joy, and eager to share my mirth. Taylor carefully sets the scene of pre-war Nazi Saxony, and devotes several paragraphs to the unpleasing figure of Martin Mutschmann, the party gauleiter. From these passages I learned that Herr Mutschmann had left school at fourteen and had taken "various management positions in lace and underwear companies." I at once laid down the book and wondered whom I should call or e-mail with this precious page reference.

Some of you who are still with me will already have caught my drift. In the climactic scene of *The Code of the Woosters*, Bertie confronts Sir Roderick Spode, the sinister bully who is "founder and head of the Saviours of Britain, a Fascist organization better known as the Black Shorts." He reduces Spode to a jelly by disclosing that he knows the would-be dictator's ghastly secret—his ownership of Eulalie Soeurs, a female underwear consortium. Devotees of this incandescently funny novel may quarrel with my brief summary here. Bertie needs to fail hilariously at least once, and to enlist the help of the invaluable Jeeves before he can bring off the coup. However, I can confidently expect some fellow sufferers to write in, and to thank me in broken tones for this confirming serendipity.

Indeed, if anything could ever put one off being a Wodehouse fan, it would be the somewhat cultish element

among his admirers and biographers. Such people have a tendency to allude to him as "The Master." They publish monographs about the exact geographical location of Blandings Castle, or the Drones Club. They hold dinners at which breadstuffs are thrown. Their English branch publishes the quarterly *Wooster Sauce*, and their American branch publishes the quarterly *Plum Lines*: two painfully unfunny titles. They materialize, in other words, Evelyn Waugh's view that Wodehouse created a delightful, self-contained world of his own. The only modern comparison I can think of is to the sterner "Irregulars" who have their shrine at 221b Baker Street.

Robert McCrum is by no means immune from the lure of all this, but his biography has a tendency to let in day-



light upon the magic. Wodehouse was a rather beefy, hearty chap, with a lifelong interest in the sporting subculture of the English boarding school and a highly developed instinct for the main chance. He had no sex life or love life worth recording, and seemed to reserve his affections primarily for animals. He was so self-absorbed that he was duped into collaboration with the Nazis and had to plead the "bloody fool" defense. His subsequently wrecked reputation was redeemed only by an almost manic focus on work, and by an insistence on reproducing a lost and dreamy world of English innocence.

Well, to take these points in reverse order, there's no mystery about the continuing fascination of Blandings Castle and the universe of Jeeves, or their appeal for those who have never met a butler or received an invitation to an English country house. George Orwell pointed out long ago, in his penetrating essay on "Boys' Weeklies," that the children of the back streets would spend their scant pocket money in order to immerse themselves in stories about upper-crust life in ivy-covered "public" schools. And why should this astonish us, when we see today's American youngsters stating with confidence which "house" at Hogwarts School they would join if they only could? Fantasy worlds are so-called for good reason,

and richly and rightly rewarded is the author who can truly create one.

As for the bizarre moment when the creator of Jeeves and Ukridge and Psmith appeared on Nazi radio after being trapped by the fall of France, McCrum is only the latest of many biographers to acquit his subject on the main charge. Here is one of the opening paragraphs of Wodehouse's first chat, broadcast on June 28, 1941:

Young men, starting out in life, have often asked me, "How can I become an Internee?" Well, there are several methods. My own was to buy a villa in Le Touquet on the coast of France and stay there till the Germans came along. This is probably the best and simplest system. You buy the villa and the Germans do the rest.

The genius of this, in my opinion, lies not merely in its deadpan intonation but in its essential truth. (There must have been, one likes to think, an editor in Berlin who vetted the transcript and said to himself, "That seems harmless enough.") Wodehouse and his wife, Ethel, had in fact followed exactly that "system," and had been too innocent and unworldly to try and run away until it was too late. They had also been unwilling to put their Pekingese in quarantine—which goes to show how far the stereotype of the English dog lover can be pushed. Fat-headed as he was for accepting the Germans' invitation in the first place, Wodehouse was not actually working for Joseph Goebbels and his Ministry of Propaganda. He was, as McCrum shows, being used by the more civilized elements in the German Foreign Office, who disliked Goebbels. Unlikely as it is that he would have appreciated the difference, Wodehouse responded to the baited invitation with the genial attitude of one who says "When in Rome," or "One must be civil." It's quite impossible that the man who had invented Sir Roderick Spode in 1938 was prey to any covert sympathy for fascism.

Prior to this moment of hideous embarrassment, Wodehouse had manifested the same almost childlike stoicism when deported from France and interned in a disused lunatic asylum in the town of Tost, Poland. As he was





later to put it, "Tost is no beauty spot. It lies in the heart of sugar-beet country ... There is a flat dullness about the countryside which has led many a visitor to say, 'If this is Upper Silesia, what must Lower Silesia be like?'"

McCrum and his fellow Wodehousian Anthony Lane, of *The New Yorker*, have both fractionally raised their eyebrows at this levity, given that Silesia was the site of Auschwitz. (McCrum also falls into error when he says that "by association" Wodehouse had put himself into "the company of genuine traitors like William Joyce." Joyce—"Lord Haw Haw"—may have been a genuine fascist, but he was a U.S. citizen who owed no allegiance to the British crown. The British government's decision to execute him after the war was a judicial

scandal.) There is absolutely no reason to think that Wodehouse knew what was afoot in the East, and in any case the Final Solution did not begin until after the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, which did not commence until after Wodehouse had done to Tost what Bertie did to Totleigh Towers: shaken its dust from his feet.

Innumerable English reminiscences of prison-camp life during the Second World War are devoted to making one point: it was all much easier to bear if you had the experience of an English boarding school under your belt. Nicknames for obnoxious guards, complaints about the food, jokes based on the absence of females, the lampooning of stupid routines—it was an invitation to re-create the lost world of boyhood, and Wodehouse

actually finished *Money in the Bank*, to be ranked among his more amusing novels, while in the self-evidently absurd position of an internee. One might also add that during the process of deportation, a German soldier came up to shake his hand and to say "Thank you for Jeeves." This helped confirm Wodehouse in his view that people were all basically good chaps underneath, when you got to know them.

There can be little doubt that Wodehouse was a very advanced case of arrested development. Born into a family of colonial merchants and civil servants, he was abandoned by his parents for long stretches and learned to find and maintain his equilibrium in (aha!) the servants' quarters and (aha! again) the comradeship of all-male boarding schools. In the comparable cases of Kipling and Saki this entailed the early realization that childhood was a place of terror, not innocence. In the case of Pelham Grenville Wodehouse (he disliked both his given names and rather grudgingly accepted the nickname "Plum" that resulted) the resolution was more like that of young Matzerath in *The Tin Drum*: he would simply stop growing up. McCrum takes too little account of the mumps that struck Wodehouse in adolescence. It seems fairly obvious that this early affliction had a gelding effect on him, stunting his libido and making him noticeable, even to his least curious friends, as a large, pink, plump, hairless, and somewhat neuter person for the rest of his life. This was the high price he paid for the protective Eden that he never escaped.

Two other boyhood deprivations might have become a source of resentment. Wodehouse, who had always assumed that he would "go up" to Oxford University, was abruptly told by his parents that the family funds would not run to it. He was told, further, that he would have to work in a menial position in the London branch of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank. Though not as demeaning as debtors' prison or an apprenticeship in a blacking factory, this combination of disappointment and tedium might have shriveled a lesser soul. Again, McCrum

She lost  
a childhood,  
but reclaimed  
her life....



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only skates over the evidence that Wodehouse took a keen interest in the street-corner speakers of the early British socialist movement. A number of his mature stories—most notably *Archibald and the Masses*—demonstrate that he picked up more than a passing knowledge of the leftist vernacular. In the earlier tales, most obviously *Psmith in the City*, we learn that young Psmith became a devotee of Marxist theory when he was taken away from Eton and robbed of the chance to play cricket for the most snobbish school team in the country. Writing about Henry Hyndman, the founder of the Social Democratic Federation and a contemporary of Karl Marx, Barbara Tuchman said that he "adopted socialism out of spite against the world because he was not included in the Cambridge eleven." Benny Green, an earlier Wodehouse biographer, encapsulates Psmith's ethos as "an irrefutable argument that most

done. This book depicts a man who eventually managed to live in grand and comfortable circumstances, but who never for a single moment forgot that he had an infinitely demanding and ruthless taskmaster—himself. Class be damned; but he was a worker all right. His chief skill lay in making the product of his labor look easy.

He toiled in three demanding vineyards: musical comedy, screenwriting, and fiction. And he would seem to have made the decision, quite early in life, to become an American. The two determinations were obviously related, because in the early decades of the twentieth century it was evident to any aspiring Brit that New York was (a) where the action was and (b) where the money was. Still, it comes as a slight surprise to find him writing, "in a perfect agony of boredom" with London in the 1920s, that "all I want to do is get

**Simile and metaphor provide so much of the energy of Wodehouse's narration: "Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes"; "Aunt calling to aunt, like mastodons bellowing across the primeval swamp."**

work is a distasteful necessity which nobody in his right mind would ever dream of performing unless he needed the money desperately." Actually, this is hardly less true of many of the later stories, wherein a shortage of ready money comes second only to blighted romance as an obstacle to felicity.

McCrum tends to stress Wodehouse's later conservatism—his aversion to the Hollywood Communists in the Screenwriters Guild, for example, and his long battle with the tax authorities in England and America. Some of the more Marxist Wodehousians, such as Alexander Cockburn and Francis Wheen, conversely emphasize the Spode satire, or the salient point that the upper classes in Wodehouse's world are helplessly dependent on their manservants and pig keepers. The honors here can be divided more or less equally. What Wodehouse did discover, though, was that once he had cast off the shackles of the proletarian condition and become self-employed, the long day was never

back and hear the American language again." This surprise, however, is soon overtaken by the realization that American idioms, especially the idioms of the Prohibition era—"rannygazoo," "hornswoggle," "put on the dog," "bum's rush," "dude"—pervade the speech of his characters. Indeed, it was as an American, or at any rate as a writer with a large American audience, that he was thought useful by the Germans during the long period of U.S. neutrality. However much people like to yoke him with the phrase "quintessentially English," it was on American soil that he did much if not most of his best work. It's nice to remember that at his formative Dulwich School he was a near contemporary of Raymond Chandler's.

In Hollywood, where he didn't do much memorable work but did make a considerable amount of money, he helped found the Hollywood Cricket Club, in 1931. Its members included Boris Karloff, Errol Flynn, and David Niven (who appears in the movie ver-



sion of *Thank You, Jeeves*). To this we are indebted, clearly, for the marvelous opening scene of Evelyn Waugh's *The Loved One*.

Jazz Age Wodehouse, as caught by McCrum, is out on Long Island with the Scott Fitzgeralds, staying at the Algonquin, sweeping up Broadway in triumph with Jerome Kern and Cole Porter, writing musical parts for William Randolph Hearst's future sweetie Marion Davies, hobnobbing with Flo Ziegfeld, and getting hot reviews from George S. Kaufman and Dorothy Parker. Frank Crowninshield, of *Vanity Fair*, paid him top dollar. But all the time, in this world saturated with money and glamour and sex, he remained, in McCrum's phrase, "the laureate of repression." And he was, when he got home to his desk, slowly evolving the primal innocence of Lord Emsworth and Bertie Wooster—an attainment that would bring him fame far beyond the Great White Way.

Attempting to explain this dissonance between the knowing and the guileless, and between the cynical world of gay-dominated musical comedy and the blameless universe of Bertie and the Earl, I once proposed that Wodehouse must have seen or read *The Importance of Being Earnest* and somehow sublimated it. The theory is pathetically simple once you start to test it: Oscar Wilde's play opens with some witty backchat between an idle young bachelor and his butler, proceeds to introduce a terrifying aunt in the shape of Lady Bracknell, and carries on with two intertwined and frivolous engagements, which are resolved in a country house with the help of a silly rural clergyman. With Wodehouse as with Wilde, nobody has any father or mother, only aunts and uncles. (I can go on about this at length if challenged, mentioning the dates when Wodehouse began going to the theater and not omitting the fact that his father was named Ernest.) McCrum even makes a bow in my direction, asserting that although Wodehouse undoubtedly knew of Reginald Bunthorne, the "fleshy poet" satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience*, he never included any Wildeisms in his widely scattered literary allusions.

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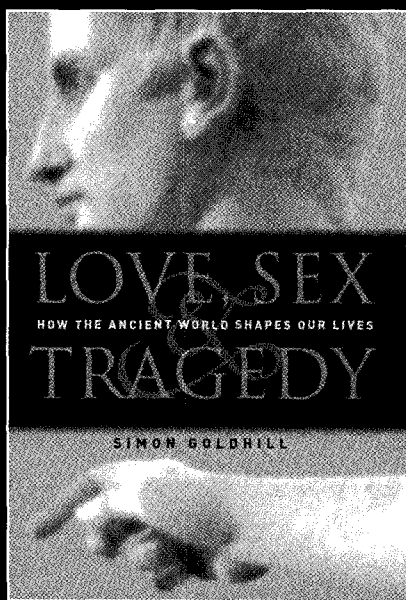
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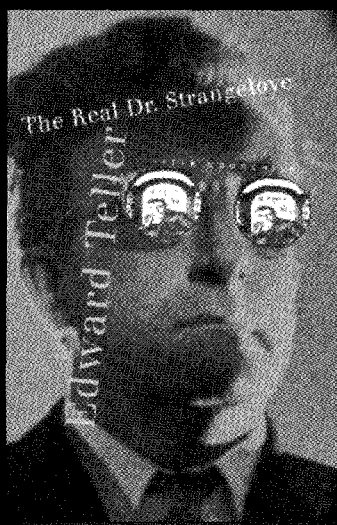
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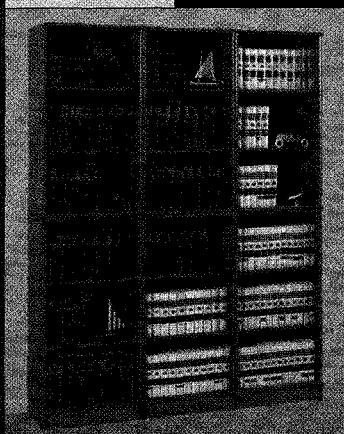
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Nor did he—by allusion, at any rate. But I've recently been unhorsed by Mark Grueter, a brilliant graduate student of mine, who came across the following in the story *Pigs Have Wings*. Set in Blandings Castle, as the title implies, it features the scapegrace Galahad Threepwood ("Gally") and the mettlesome American girl Penny Donaldson. The ambition of this dangerous young woman is to keep an appointment with her unsuitable suitor, Jerry Vail, in London. Lord Emsworth's forbidding sister Lady Constance, warns Galahad, will not hear of this.

"The expedition arrives in London tomorrow afternoon, so tomorrow night I shall be dining with my Jerry."

Gally gazed at her in amazement. Her childish optimism gave him a pang.

"With Connie keeping her fishy eye on you? Not a hope."

"Oh yes, because there's an old friend of Father's in London, and Father would never forgive me if I didn't take this opportunity of slapping her on the back and saying hello. So I shall dine with her."

"And she will bring your young man along?"

"Well, between us girls, Gally, she doesn't really exist. I'm like the poet in Shakespeare, I'm giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. Did you ever see *The Importance of Being Earnest*?"

"Don't wander from the point."

"I'm not wandering from the point. Do you remember Bunbury, the friend the hero invented? This is his mother, Mrs. Bunbury. You can always arrange these things with a little tact."

I devoutly wish, but not for the sake of my theory, that I had never had to read this passage. It does prove, after all, my original point that Wodehouse *must* have read or seen the play. But it makes the reference in such clunking, leaden tones that one would prefer to have been kept guessing. Most of Wodehouse's beautifully timed literary nudges do not give chapter and verse. (And Algernon as "the hero"?) So I sadly propose that we have here a fusion of the workaholic and the self-conscious: a grisly combination that

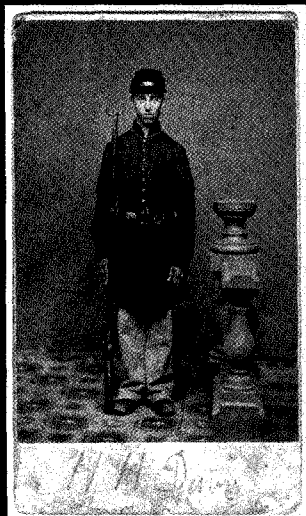


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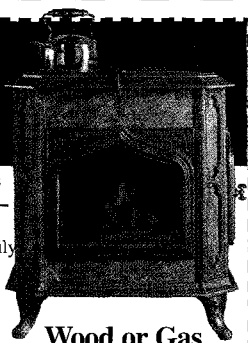


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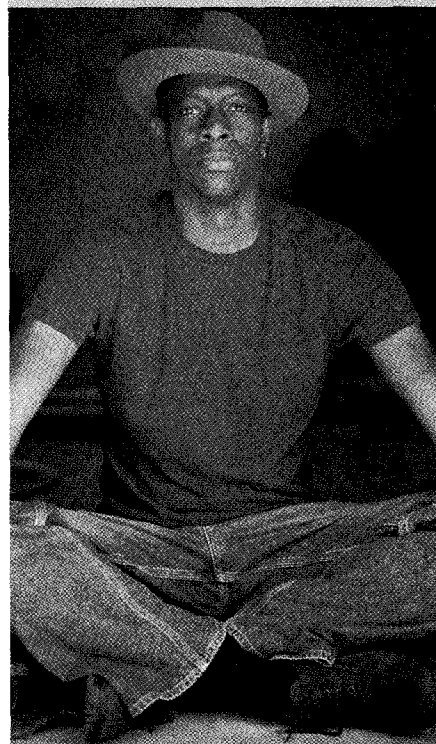
doesn't recur until the groan-making moment, in *Aunts Aren't Gentlemen* (1974), when Bertie Wooster goes out for a stroll and runs into an anti-war demonstration. (That's what I mean by letting in daylight upon magic.)

I had once thought, rather simply-mindedly, that Wodehouse's downplaying of Wilde might have to do with a revulsion from homosexuality. And his few references to the subject in his non-fictional life—he called it “homosexuality”—are generally mildly disobliging. But I learned from McCrum that in the interwar years he used to thoroughly enjoy staying with a militantly gay cousin, usefully named Charles Le Strange, who owned an eccentric but well-appointed country house in East Anglia. The most Wodehouse could be induced to say of this relative was that he was “a weird bird.” Elements of his sojourns at Hunstanton Hall were pressed into service for the innumerable country-house episodes that, Wodehouse later admitted, he relied on so greatly because any scene set under such a roof seemed somehow credible.

His staunchest admirer would be hard put to deny that Wodehouse wrote too much, but that's partly because he lived so long. And a biographer can't decently quarrel with *that*, even though the declining years offer less and less by way of incident and amusement, and less still by way of humorous genius. McCrum is one of those who esteem the “Uncle Fred” stories, which detail the wry adventures of Lord Ickenham. One can't quite allow this. The appeal is simply too broad; too general. If a volume of collected Wodehouse could be assembled, and could include no more than two full-length novels (*The Code of the Woosters* and *Right Ho, Jeeves*, the latter containing Gussie Fink-Nottle's prize-giving at Market Snodsbury Grammar School); perhaps a dozen of the more finished Jeeves and Bertie short stories (to include “The Great Sermon Handicap,” “Jeeves and the Old School Chum,” and “Jeeves and the Song of Songs”); and a selection of the Mulliner tales (both stories about the cat named Webster, the “Buck-U-Uppo” reminiscences, and the accounts of Archibald and Sach-

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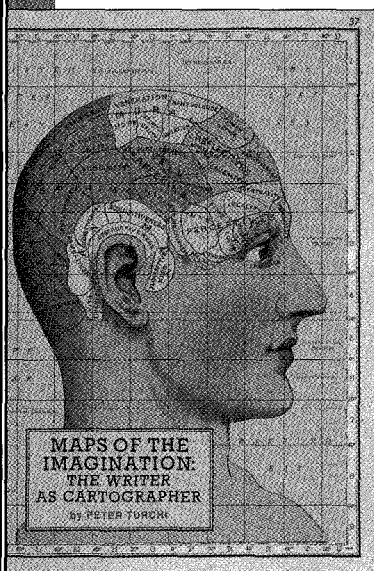
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everell), one would have a real corker that could never, ever die. As it is, one so often bumps into lost souls who claim to have "tried" Wodehouse and not got the joke. These are the unfortunates who in early and impressionable youth were handed a duff anthology by a well-meaning but mirthless aunt (or, admittedly, uncle).

Wodehouse never really went back to England after the Second World War; he had been semi-officially "cleared" of any charge of treason or collaboration, but the authorities, in a nasty bit of petty sadism, did not actually tell him they had in fact concluded that the evidence was insufficient. So he continued to churn out Edwardian-era plots from a home on Long Island, and to help set up the revoltingly named "Bide-A-Wee" home for stray and abandoned pets. This slushiness, like his sporadic interest in spiritualism and the occult, is of exactly the sort that he was best at lampooning—most especially in the Princess Diana-like person of Madeleine Bassett, a ghastly girl who thinks that the stars are God's daisy-chain. ("All rot, of course," Bertie says of this. "They're nothing of the sort.") But it may have come in useful in his frequent descriptions of an almost ectoplasmic Jeeves, as he "shimmered" into a room, or sometimes "filtered" or "floated" out.

Simile and metaphor provide so much of the energy of Wodehouse's narration: "He writhed like an electric fan"; "He wilted like a salted snail"; "Ice formed on the butler's upper slopes"; "There came a sound like that of Mr. G. K. Chesterton falling onto a sheet of tin"; "He looked like a sheep with a secret sorrow"; "A lifetime of lunches had caused his chest to slip down to the mezzanine floor"; "Aunt calling to aunt, like mastodons bellowing across the primeval swamp." I myself jumped like a pea on a hot shovel only twice during the reading of this biography: first when I read of Wodehouse's referring to his youthful case of "clap," and second when, in his letters from prison, he twice employed the word "toilet" for "lavatory." It's important that his votaries be able to think of him as virtually disembodied. In a great and noble defense of Wodehouse against the wartime calumny that

was spread about him, Orwell observed that the complete omission of the sex joke was an astonishing sacrifice for a comic writer to make. But for Wodehouse it seems to have been no sacrifice at all. His marriage to Ethel, though it led to a great stepfatherly love for her daughter, was a business arrangement, with pets—preferably Pekes—standing in for offspring. The nearest approach to even an innuendo comes in *Thank You, Jeeves*, when Bertie finds his former fiancée, the American Pauline Stoker, in his bed, wearing his "heliotrope pyjamas with the old gold stripe." He phrases it thus: "The attitude of fellows towards finding girls in their bedroom shortly after midnight varies. Some like it. Some don't. I didn't."

One gasps at Wodehouse for going even as far as that. And given that he mentioned his "clap" only to his much more seasoned friend Guy Bolton, and late in life too, I prefer to believe that he was just trying to keep up, to appear to be one of the boys. He never found this easy, however. One of his editors, Christopher Maclehose, told me that he had once been to visit "Plum" on Long Island, and had found him shyly reading a copy of Alec Waugh's novel *A Spy in the Family*. This little effort was an extremely mild essay in erotic comedy, but Wodehouse found it profoundly shocking and asked Maclehose if everything in England had become so filthy in his absence. If not disgruntled, as Bertie Wooster once put it in another connection, he wasn't exactly grunted either. But this is just as one might have hoped it to be.

His admirers will desert P. G. Wodehouse for his archaic *Upstairs Downstairs* settings on the same day that people discard Oscar Wilde for being too fond of the drawing room or discover Charles Dickens to be anachronistic for writing about stagecoaches in an age of steam. His attention to language, his near faultless ability to come up with names that are at once ludicrous and credible, and the intricacy of his plotting are imperishable. Unlike Wilde, though, he put his genius into his work, not his life. ▀

*Christopher Hitchens is a contributing editor of The Atlantic and a columnist for Vanity Fair.*



# BOOKS

## Fatherland

*Philip Roth has conjured up an alternative America—but fantasy is the wrong form for a writer uncannily able to find real life fantastic*

BY CLIVE JAMES

**P**ortnoy, yes, it's an old French name, a corruption of *porte noir*, meaning black door or gate. Apparently in the Middle Ages in France the door to our family manor house ...” Thus the young Alexander Portnoy dreams of convincing the pert shiksa ice skater that he is not a Jew. But even in his dream she is not to be misled. “You seem a very nice person, Mr. Porte-Noir, but why do you go around covering the middle of your face like that?” As the narrator goes on to explain, to us if not to her, it is because of his nose, which, unlike his penis, is now, with the onset of adolescence, so insistent on extending itself that it can't be persuaded to retract even temporarily. “That ain't a nose,” shouts his interior voice, “it's a hose! Screw off, Jewboy! Get off the ice and leave these girls alone!”

The Jewish notables who vilified Philip Roth after the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint*, in 1969, were objecting to a lot more about its hero than his preoccupation with sex. They didn't like his preoccupation with his nose, either. They didn't like Roth's apparent suggestion that there was no level ground for a young male American Jew between the twin peaks of tormented insecurity and priapic self-assertion. As a goy who was born and raised in Australia, where the book was banned, and who first read it in England, where it wasn't, I couldn't see their point at the time. I was too busy rolling around fighting for breath. It was the funniest book in the world. What was there not to like, except perhaps the hilarious sexual frankness that had caused the distinctly non-Jewish puritans of my benighted homeland to wig out? Why should his own people attack him?

With Roth's latest book, *The Plot Against America*, the answer becomes

clear. It was because the very idea of “his own people” was bad news to those who wanted their ethnicity to be a minor issue, not a major one. A re-reading of *Portnoy's Complaint*—and there could be no more delightful occupation—reveals that the rabbinical elders who convicted its author of *Jüdische Selbst-hass*, Jewish self-hatred, had quite a lot to go on. Not without reason, they were more shaken up by what was going on in Portnoy's mind than by what was going on in his pants. Compared with his throbbing self-consciousness as a Jew, Portnoy's throbbing crotch was a sideshow. But Roth's judges convicted him without trying him first. He was proud of his background—savagely proud. Along with all the other themes he has explored since, his exultant celebration of Jewish-American social cohesion is there in the first of his books to become world famous. The earlier books—*Good-bye, Columbus* (1959), *Letting Go* (1962), and *When She Was Good* (1967)—had

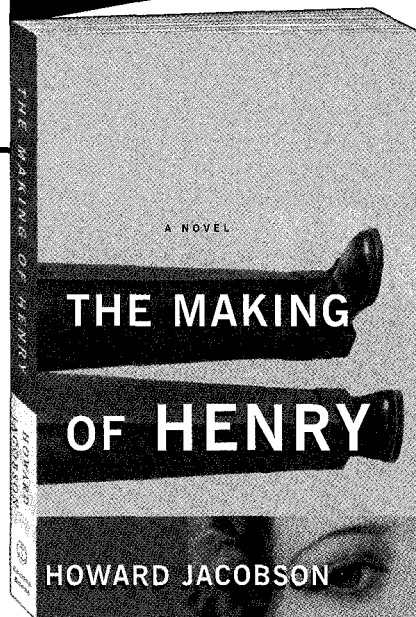
each stated some of his future subjects, but *Portnoy's Complaint* stated the whole lot, packed together and painted like a circus act. *Portnoy's Complaint* is a trick car out of which, instead of a family of dwarfs, novels climb one after another, at an astonishing rate and seemingly without end. None of them is without its felicities, a round dozen are indispensable reading, a good handful of that dozen are among the best novels ever written in America, and all

of them can be found tightly encoded in his original masterpiece. That lavish celebration of baseball in *The Great American Novel*, for example, is there in the scenes where the grown men of Portnoy's arcadian neighborhood play seven-inning softball on a spring Sunday morning while the youngsters long to be so masculine, funny, and sure of their place. But this new novel was in there too, a novel wholly, instead of partly, concerned with being unsure—with insecurity.



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Insecurity saturates *The Plot Against America*. Unfortunately, the saturation goes right down to the level of its telling. For a writer blessed with the eyes and ears to find real life fantastic in every detail, fantasy is the wrong form. As a narrative idea, Roth's latest brain wave is down there with the one animating *The Breast* (1972)—perhaps even lower, because at least the *Breast* had Kafka's cockroach for a predecessor. The predecessor of *The Plot Against America* is Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, a considerable book in its own right but one that exhausts the possibilities of its narrative trick, leaving Roth little room for maneuver. In *Fatherland*, America is unable to intervene decisively against Germany, leaving the Nazis a free hand in Europe. In *The Plot Against America*, America is unable to intervene decisively against Germany, leaving ... what? Well, it leaves Roth a chance to speculate about what might have happened to America's Jews.

But first of all, and you might well ask, what happens to America? Charles Lindbergh becomes President. To make this plausible, Roth has to rejigger the 1940 Republican convention. The rejiggering entails quite a lot of jiggery-pokery, but he just about makes it stick. There is a persuasive actuality to the way Lindbergh captures the electorate's imagination by flying from city to city. It would be more persuasive if he were doing it in Germany, where Hitler actually did do that; Hitler made a point of dropping from the clouds all over the place, and Leni Riefenstahl's orgasmic scenes of the smitten populace searching the sky for the arrival of his aircraft are a fair registration of the enthusiasm he actually aroused. You can just about imagine Lindbergh's having the same effect on the American backwoods, and there is no strain at all in imagining the appeal of his message: "Vote for Lindbergh or vote for War." Almost everybody was keen on voting against war with Germany until Japan attacked, and might well have remained keen on it afterward. If Hitler had been less crazy he would never have declared war on the United States, which the terms of his treaty with Japan did not oblige him to do. If

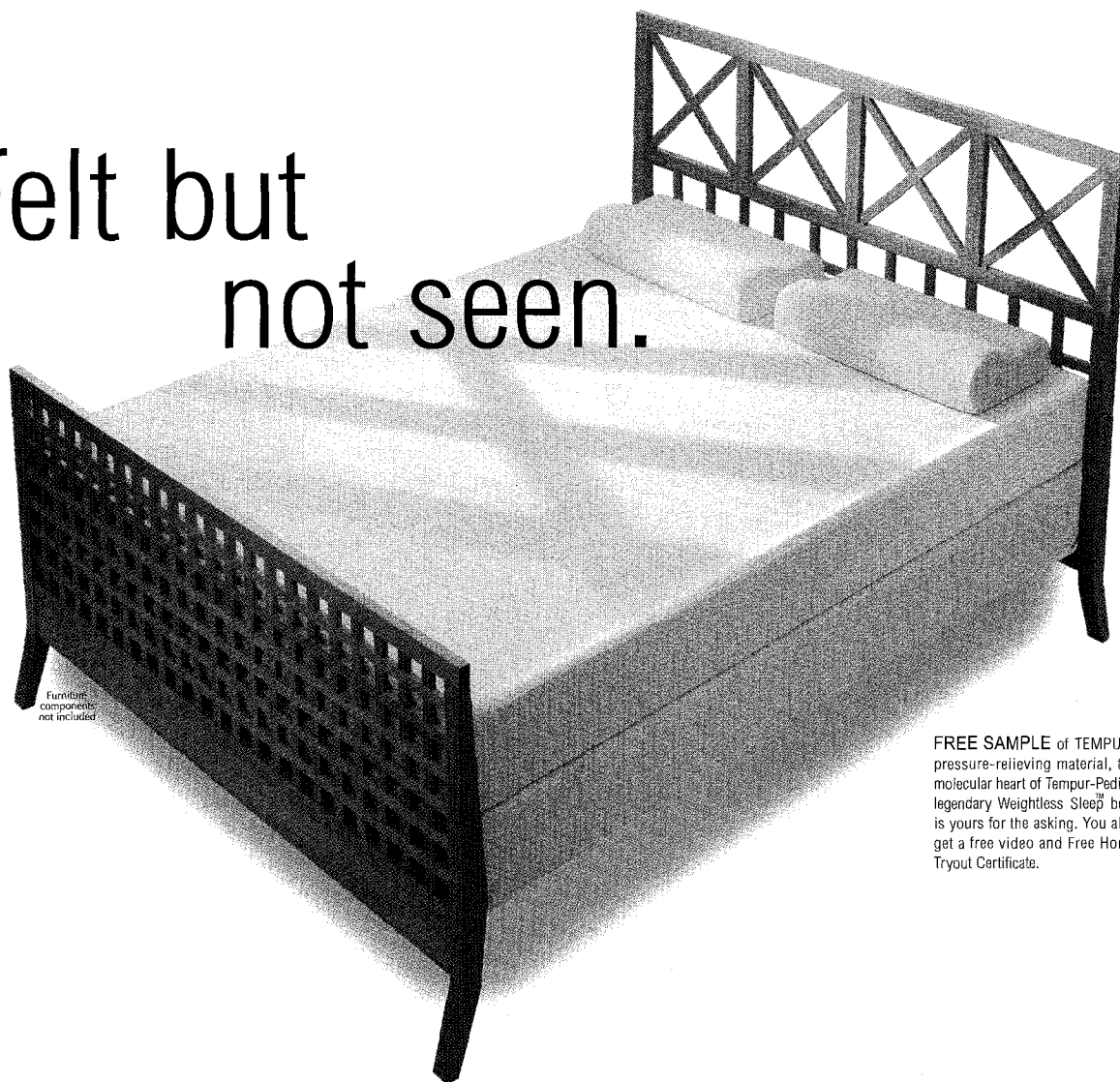
he hadn't, Roosevelt might have had a hard job getting America into the war against him. That was the true fork in history, which Roth might have chosen to treat, but it would have meant leaving Lindbergh out. Roth, however, wanted Lindbergh in, because Lindbergh had anti-Semitic views.

Roth's preparation of an alternative history is just a rearrangement of the furniture. If it had really concerned him, he might have done it more adroitly. But what really concerns him is the notion of an America with its traditional anti-Semitic prejudices given official endorsement. "Our homeland was America," says the Roth-like narrator. "Then the Republicans nominated Lindbergh and everything changed." Roth's challenge is to show how it changed. The challenge is not easily met, because America was never Germany. Certainly America was no stranger to official violence: in its jails and police stations between the wars, the third degree was common. There are plentiful records, some of them filmed, of Henry Ford's armed goons enforcing layoffs, of Bonus Marchers being put to flight by the troops of that barely controllable authoritarian General Douglas MacArthur, and, of course, of racist atrocities in the South. But there was no case of a minority's being permanently threatened with violence backed by federal law. The Nazis did indeed come to power legally, after which they remade the laws in their favor, so that the hounding and eventual extermination of the Jews could be done on a legal basis. But none of that would have been possible if Hitler had not been granted dictatorial powers.

**I**n the United States, where the separation of powers is the fundamental principle of the Constitution, not even the most charismatic President—not even, say, Charles Lindbergh—could have instituted, in peacetime, racially selective federal laws without the approval of Congress. Had Lindbergh set about to gain such approval, he would have had to sway the media, not to mention Hollywood. As every anti-Semite is eager to insist, Jewish representation in those fields has always been large. Aware of these consider-



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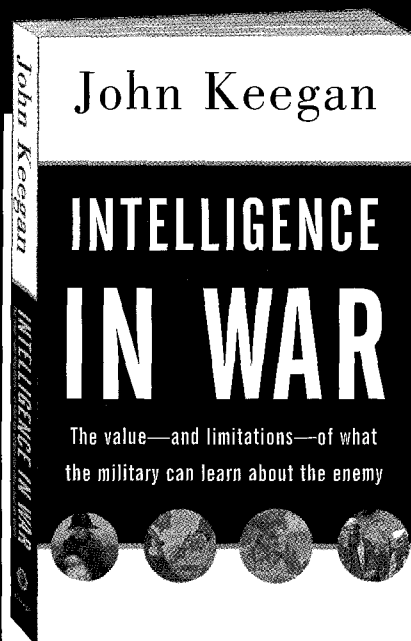


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ations, Roth knows that an American version of Nazi Germany's 1935 Nuremberg laws wouldn't do even as a fantasy. So he introduces the idea of the Office of American Absorption. He isn't clear about how this apparently benign organization could have been set up without a debate in Washington about its possible malignancy, but he is disturbingly persuasive about how it might have operated had it come into existence. Bright young urban Jews of the Portnoy type are selected for temporary resettlement in the rural heartland, where they are encouraged to question their sense of ethnic solidarity. The result is meant to be an erosion of their communal identity. This nightmare by Roth gains force from its closeness to the dream of every Jewish assimilationist. Not only calling themselves Americans first and foremost but feeling it, the young Jews forget their heritage as a prelude to denying it.

Roth is dealing here with a continuing dilemma—individual acceptance is bound to be hindered by any cherishing of a collective uniqueness—and might have made more of it. He shows how the views of the Lindberghs, man and wife, might have rendered the American upper orders even less shy about expressing their anti-Semitism: Jews not only can't get into the country club, they can't get into an ordinary hotel. He also shows that top-level anti-Semitism might have gained quite a lot of tacit support from top-level Jews. Assimilated Jews in Germany during the Weimar Republic frowned on the influx of Orthodox Jews from the east, on the grounds that they would inflame Nazi-style anti-Semitism further. (Actually, the Nazis didn't need any inflaming, but the full possibilities of that fact were not yet apparent, even to them.) Even in America, and especially in uptown New York, there was a sad but understandable tradition whereby the settled and successful *haute juiverie* frowned on the raw immigrants whose habits might fan *gojische* prejudice. If Roth, as well as seizing on the real-life character of Lindbergh, had seized on the real-life character of, say, Walter Lippmann, he might really have been on to something. The destroyers-for-bases idea that

saved Britain's life when Britain was battling alone against the Nazis was almost wholly Lippmann's. But he had come too far in downplaying his Jewish origins to take up the collective fate of the Jews as his chief concern. During the war he wrote nothing about the extermination of the European Jews, and after it he wrote little. Lippmann was the living definition of a Jew who considered himself an American first, and he might have provided Roth with the ideal demonstration of just how divisive that attitude could be in a subtle but comprehensive campaign to destroy Jewish solidarity. It could be said that by declining to adopt the role of representative Jew, he was already conducting one.

And Lippmann could have said, and been right, that the very idea of a collective Jewish identity—the idea that all Jews were connected in a conspiracy of blood—was a fantasy made real only by Hitler. Even in Germany, and especially among the Jewish intelligentsia, it took time to grasp the reality that the Nazis would make no exceptions. It just seemed too insane. As Hannah Arendt once argued, you had to be a madman to guess what was coming. In Roth's alternative America the man who spots the implications of the insidious new official encouragement of anti-Semitism is a journalist unhindered by a sense of proportion. If Roth doesn't seize on the real-life character of Walter Lippmann, he does seize on the real-life character of Walter Winchell. This is the most daring stroke in the book, and leads to its most original single sentence, which Roth puts into the mouth of another force for good, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia: "Walter is too loud, Walter talks too fast, Walter says too much, and yet, by comparison, Walter's vulgarity is something great, and Lindbergh's decorum is hideous."

Roth's Winchell fights the good fight, and pays for it with his life. After President Lindbergh disappears, there is an ultra-right coup d'état, Winchell's own presidential candidacy is terminated by his assassination, and America temporarily goes openly pro-Nazi as a prelude to preparing for war on Canada. Why does Lindbergh disappear? It would be spoiling the story to tell you. Roth does a



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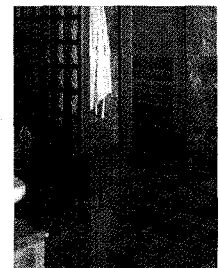
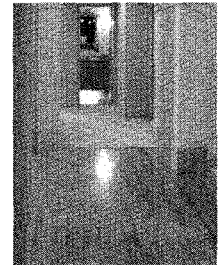
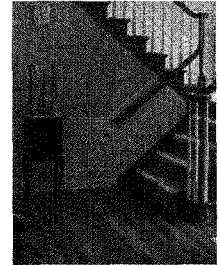
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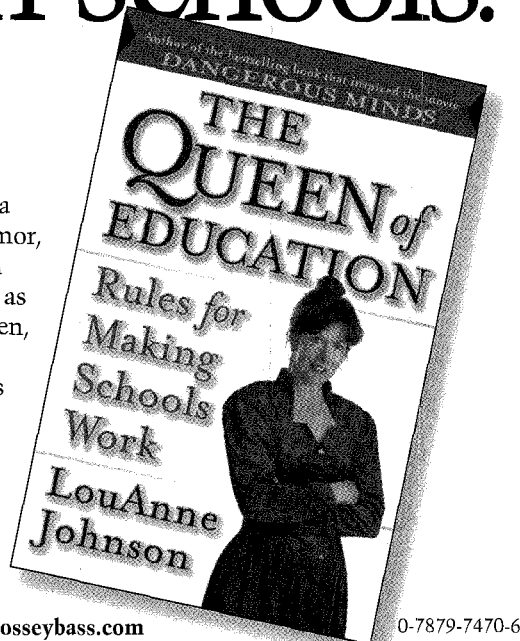
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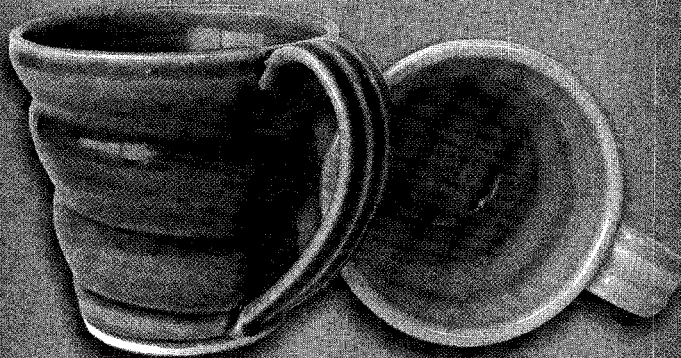
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pretty good job of spoiling the story himself, by dishing out improbabilities with shameless haste; if it were not for the quality of the writing, you could be reading *The Da Vinci Code*. Luckily for the reader's mental health, Roth is no more capable of an uninteresting sentence than Dan Brown is capable of an interesting one. But you would wonder why Roth bothered, if it weren't so obvious that his chief concern is not with official repression but with social prejudice, as it was then and still is today. Here, once again, and as always, he is in a cleft stick. He knows that he was brought up in an artist's Arcadia, the ideal combination of domestic stability and psychic turmoil. ("Doctor," Portnoy asks his analyst, "what should I rid myself of, tell me, the hatred ... or the love?") Lest we doubt that, he gives it to us again: the Weequahic neighborhood of Newark, New Jersey, in all its emotional uproar, gnawing neurosis, flagrant embarrassments, and career-forming linguistic vitality. (With the proviso that literature should never be thought of as a branch of sociology, the novels of Richard Price can be said to give us the bitter contemporary reality of the boroughs that once inspired Roth's sweetest memories.) But Roth also knows that another Arcadia patronizes the one he came from. To the blessed denizens of WASP Heaven, or Lindbergh Land, the noisy passions of his childhood will always look like a joke. The only possible defense mechanism of the Jewish comic writer is to get in with the joke first, and time it better; it was Woody Allen, not a Jew-baiter, who stuck himself with a rabbi's beard in *Annie Hall*. But to the mind in which it is operating, the defense mechanism must inevitably seem a form of concession—especially when the mind belongs to a man who has taken comic writing to the highest levels of philosophy, politics, and social analysis.

Roth emerged from his borough as a full-blown sophisticate, and it is hard for the sophisticate to look back on his origins without looking down. *Porte-Noir* can't lust after his button-nosed ice skater without tacitly conceding that a standard marriage to a nice Jewish girl is beneath his ambitions. His irrepressible schlong is a rock drill to a

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higher stratum. The price of rising in the social world is an apparent alliance with the prejudiced; to prove that there is no alliance is a constant battle; and the result is a torn conscience. In Roth's case, the torn conscience has been the motor of a steadily accumulating literary achievement without parallel in his time—an achievement whose resonance reaches far into Europe and the Middle East, making even the most illustrious of his American contemporaries look comparatively provincial. He is aware to the point of self-laceration that he was born in the right spot; he was probably already aware of it when he put his childhood pennies into one of the blue tins that helped to build Israel. But he is stuck with the anguish of an insoluble paradox: as an individual, he rejects the role of representative; but he is bound to be a representative when he fights prejudice.

As a man of reason, he must have figured out early that it has always been even worse for blacks: any photograph of Duke Ellington taken late in his life shows what being cast as a representative can do to the face of a genius. Ellington was too polite to say that an invitation to the White House was no full consolation for all the hotels that wouldn't have let him past the front desk. There was never a hotel that Roth couldn't get into, but he can be excused for inventing an alternative and worse American past in which his father would be told that the room he had been given was unavailable after all. It's an understandable bad dream. But it hasn't led to a good book, and couldn't have. The United States will never be free of racial prejudice for the same reason that it will never enshrine racial prejudice in anything like the Nuremberg Laws: it's a free country. Being that, it is bound to be full of things we don't like, but the federally sanctioned destruction of a racial minority isn't among them, and hasn't been since Wounded Knee. As Roth must have realized long before he finished writing it, the insuperable problem with *The Plot Against America* is that America is against the plot. ▀

Clive James is a London-based literary journalist, novelist, critic, and poet. His collected poems, *The Book of My Enemy*, and a selection of his critical prose, *As of This Writing*, were both published last year.

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Great novels improved (in some specific way) by their screen versions

BY LORRIE MOORE

With rare exceptions—di Lampedusa's *The Leopard* (made into a film by Luchino Visconti), Thackeray's *Barry Lyndon* (done beautifully by Stanley Kubrick)—great novels don't make great movies. But here are five whose film versions nonetheless reveal notable, if limited, improvements.

**Tess of the d'Urbervilles**, by Thomas Hardy (1891). Roman Polanski made some mistakes with young girls. But so did Hardy, in pairing up Tess's sister, 'Liza-Lu, with Angel Clare at the novel's end, heartlessly soon after Tess's death. Polanski's *Tess* (1979) eliminated that, and also the weird religious period of Alec d'Urberville, and through these abridgements managed to make several dramatic elements of the novel more emotionally convincing.

**Sophie's Choice**, by William Styron (1979). The Sophie of Styron's novel is seen largely through the scrim of the narrator, Stingo, and his overheated libido. Physically she is a kind of Ursula Andress figure, a pretty woman of a "wonderfully negligent sexuality" having mostly to do with her "truly sumptuous rear end." Enter Meryl Streep, who in Alan J. Pakula's 1982 film adaptation may at first seem miscast. But with her Plantagenet face and broken, regal demeanor, she raises Sophie to a greater plane and helps us see her outside the narrator's desire, which is kept to a more attractive level thereby. Streep's performance is one of luminously diffident grief: full of moues, flushes, and hesitations in speech often unavailable on the page.

**The Portrait of a Lady**, by Henry James (1881). James tried to be a person on whom nothing was lost, but some things were lost on him nonetheless. The death of Isabel Archer's young son is one of them. James gives it the briefest mention, and then moves on to other matters. Jane Campion's 1996 film partially corrects this, with a few visual allusions: the plaster hand of a baby, tearfully contemplated; a doll's head in a box; and a small, pretty dog to

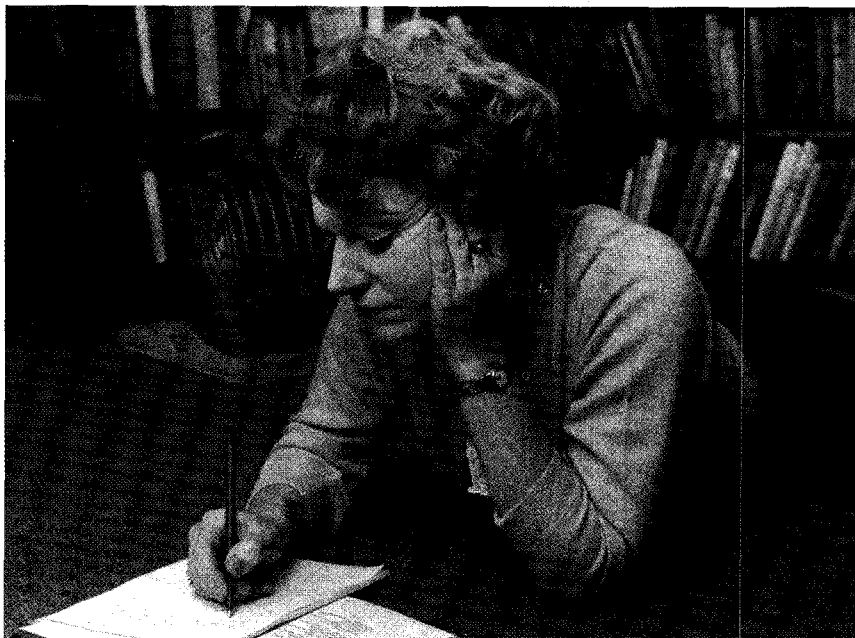


welcome and trail the heroine. They are all reminders of her physical and emotional loss, which James—busy with matters more spiritual and material—appears to have forgotten.

**Washington Square**, by Henry James (1881). In scuttling Catherine Sloper's engagement to a fortune-hunting scoundrel, her father not only "breaks the spring" of all affection in her but also deprives her of the opportunity to have children (and himself to have descendants). Perhaps implicit in James's story (and in William Wyler's 1949 film *The Heiress*), this aspect of her fate is virtually the only thing this swift, efficient novel fails to imagine fully enough. But Agnieszka Holland's 1997 film, which begins and ends with children, emphasizes it, giving the heroine a godchild to carry around and sing to.

**Mansfield Park**, by Jane Austen (1814). Allusions to Antiguan slave trading and the cultural and economic imperialism that have enriched the Bertram clan are made explicit in Patricia Rozema's 1999 film—largely in the opening and the closing credit sequence, which feature African singers in a kind of wail from the sea. This theme of "black cargo" is made part of the story in a way the author never intended. Yet Rozema underscores the bitter ironies of Austen's world—its concern for moral character and respectable appearances—without sacrificing Austen (even if one does wonder what a slave ship is doing off the English coast). The milieu of *Mansfield Park*, contained and generally undistorted, is at the same time enlarged, contextualized, seen whole.

Lorrie Moore is the author of the story collections *Birds of America*, *Like Life*, and *Self-Help* and the novels *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* and *Anagrams*. She is this year's guest editor of *The Best American Short Stories*.



## BOOKS

# The Prime of Ms. Muriel Spark

*Her latest novel isn't her best work, but it illuminates the novels that are*

BY JAMES WOOD

If American fiction has been swarmed over recently by so-called chicklit, British writing has been dominated by its tougher sibling, ladlit. It is hard to enter any London bookstores—memorably disdained by V. S. Naipaul as now resembling “toyshops”—without being assailed by a dictator-size poster of some bullet-headed pugilist, his lips pursed in a macho moue, the apparently unhappy author of a novel whose title is invariably a punchy single word, such as *Porno*. The ideal title might be *Dumpbin*, because the quality of most of these books is almost beside the point; they exist as easy windows onto their authors, who have found themselves in print largely because they are so young, and whose promising juvenility represents the real *raison d'être* of the publishing event. In a world in which one can still be a “younger writer” at forty, to be twenty-five and a published author—or, better still, nineteen—is to be indeed a mere chick or lad, loaded with metropolitan gold.

In his *Dictionary*, Dr. Johnson defined Grub Street as a place inhabited by hacks and writers of “temporary

poems,” and of course publishing’s current superficiality will not last. Nevertheless, it feels long enough, and perhaps Muriel Spark, now in her eighties, fears that she will not outlive it. Her new novel, *The Finishing School*, satirically assails, among other things, the culture of spectacle that has grown up around novel-writing, and in particular around novel-writing by attractive young people. In a Swiss finishing school run on distinctly liberal lines are gathered nine pupils, most of them girls. One attractive boy, Chris, seems to be a prodigiously gifted writer, a mere seventeen-year-old who is already at work on a historical novel. The school’s owner and principal, the twenty-nine-year-old Rowland Mahler, teaches creative writing and has read some of Chris’s bewilderingly talented book. Alas, he, too, is an aspiring writer, but thoroughly arrested where Chris is fertile. His wife, Nina, exasperatedly asks him one day, “Don’t you feel you’re one of those people who can get by without writing a novel?”

Rowland is consumed by jealousy of Chris’s talent, and Spark’s very short novel—short novella, even—charts the

growth of that envy as it burgeons almost to madness. (Rowland is advised to cure himself by checking in to a local monastery named St. Justin Amadeus—a typically Sparky little reference to the most canonical case of creative envy in history.) He dreams of killing Chris, and is drowning amid his empty pretensions: “At the present time he had shaved his face clean, feeling more like a brilliant young novelist under this appearance.” But Chris actualizes what for Rowland is mere imagining: Chris is a brilliant young novelist and feels like one, and he is a successful seducer to boot.

But *is* Chris brilliant? Film producers and publishers who have heard about the young star, and are eager to bottle the light he radiates, arrive at the school to interview him; yet Spark carefully hints throughout the book that Chris may be only mediocre. To begin with, the man who rates his talent so high, Rowland, is himself without any, and thus a poor judge of it. And Spark, who loves to control the rations of her authorial knowingness, refers almost in passing to “the eventual flamboyant literary success of Chris himself, if not entirely of his book”—a characteristic dig. Spark’s novel is as much about psychic co-dependence, or even homoerotic love rivalry, as about literary competition. Spark may be one of the least Dostoevskian contemporary novelists (she’s far too brisk and logical for all that wallow and murk), but here she strikingly reprises the Russian writer’s novella *The Eternal Husband*, in which a feeble, cuckolded husband stalks his dead wife’s lover, alternately murderous toward the seducer and envious of his superior sexual prowess. In that book cuckold and seducer eventually become dependent on each other, and perhaps secretly desire each other: the dead wife is the silent third who completes their love triangle. Likewise, although Rowland’s obsessive interest in Chris is at first unrequited, eventually Chris admits to his own need of Rowland: “I need his jealousy ... I can’t work without it,” he tells Nina. You could say that text—Chris’s completed novel, Rowland’s stalled one—is the silent third that completes their love triangle.

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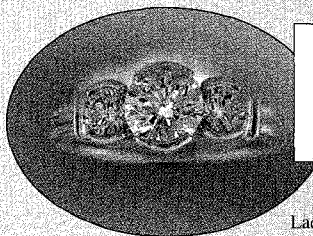


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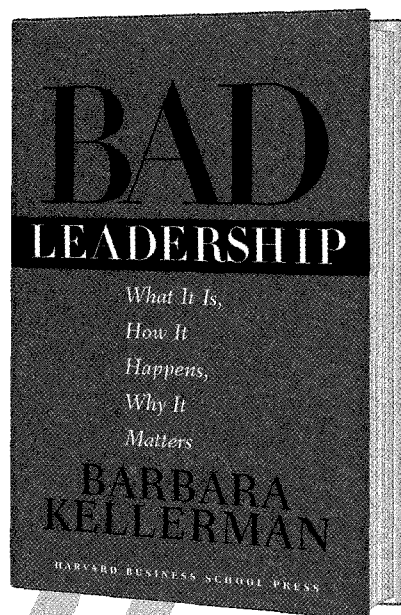
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Muriel Spark has always been a writer of fiercely composed, devoutly starved fictions. *The Finishing School*, like several of her most recent books (*Symposium*, *Aiding and Abetting*) has a somewhat anorexic quality; Spark's austere principle "Never apologize, never explain" is embodied in storytelling of a fablelike simplicity and directness. She can seem to view events with all the detachment of a choirboy at a funeral. When Chris is visited by a film producer and a director, we are told only that "one was tall and middle-aged, the other short and young." Chapter Fourteen of this slight book begins, "Rowland's father died. He flew to join his family in Yorkshire."

One current of this kind of storytelling, in which a certain tact of omission is united with a high degree of authorial control, flows from Jane Austen to Penelope Fitzgerald, and seems distinctively British or even English (despite Spark's Scottishness). E. M. Forster famously kills off Gerald in *The Longest Journey* with the bracing "Gerald died that afternoon." But Spark has always been interested in precisely the questions raised

by such peremptory storytelling: What does it mean, as a novelist, to create characters whose lives one can then control and curtail? Is it allowable for a novelist to have this kind of Godlike knowledge about her creations? Does it not mean that even the most "sympathetic" novelist is really a cruel deity, playing with lives in order to make pretty moral patterns? Nabokov, for instance, always insisted with pride that his characters were mere chess pieces, to be pushed around in brilliant displays of authorial gamesmanship. Chekhov might be at the other end of the spectrum, a writer who wants to disappear into his characters, to let them seem to throw away their scripts and inhabit their freedom.

These may appear to be relatively abstract concerns. They are certainly self-conscious, even postmodern, and explain why Frank Kermode, in his excellent introduction to the new Every-

man collection of four early Spark novels, compares Spark to *nouveaux romanciers* such as Alain Robbe-Grillet and the British avant-gardist Christine Brooke-Rose. But one of the finest aspects of Spark's long career has been the way in which she has balanced the old-fashioned pleasures of storytelling and characterization with a persistent modern anxiety about the viability of those pleasures, yet without frowning pleasure away. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, still Spark's best book, remains so because it so beautifully creates a vital and intriguing character—Jean Brodie—while simultaneously asking us to reflect on how well we can ever know people at all, whether real or invented by novelists.

Jean Brodie is the devastatingly popular schoolteacher who dominates

the junior pupils of the Marcia Blaine School for Girls, in Edinburgh in the 1930s. She tyrannically controls her students' education, forcing on them her love of Giotto, of Italy, and, finally, of Mussolini and Hitler. Her best pupils form an elite, which she calls "the crème de la crème," and they are fiercely loyal to her—though one of them, Sandy Stranger, will

betray her and force her from the school (officially for "teaching Fascism"). The novel, like *The Finishing School*, is much concerned with the erotics of teaching, that contradictory authority of the teacher who seduces and bullies at the same time, and the primitive ways in which people know and label one another at school. Thus Spark carefully introduces each girl in Miss Brodie's set as "famous" for one thing or another. Mary Macgregor is famous for being stupid; Sandy is famous for insight and for small "pig-like" eyes; Rose is famous for sex; and so on. Spark uses these simple notorieties repetitively, almost as a kind of Homeric tag, whenever the characters are reintroduced in the book. This, she seems to say, is the only way we can know these particular characters.

But do we know Miss Brodie very much better? It is a curious paradox that one of the best-known characters of post-war British fiction (alongside, say, Pow-

**THE FINISHING SCHOOL**

by Muriel Spark  
Doubleday

**THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE, THE GIRLS OF SLENDER MEANS, THE DRIVER'S SEAT, THE ONLY PROBLEM**

by Muriel Spark  
Everyman



ell's Widmerpool and Naipaul's Biswas) is made real to us in barely more than a collection of brief sketches, bound together into an elegantly slender novella. Were you to roam the streets of Edinburgh with a microphone, interrogating surprised citizens, you'd learn that Miss Brodie is "known" and "loved" first because Maggie Smith once played her so consummately in a celebrated film, and second as a collection of famous maxims: "I am in my prime," "You are the crème de la crème," "The Philistines are upon us, Mr. Lloyd," and so on. Miss Brodie, in other words, is not "known." We, as readers, know her just as her pupils did: as a collection of sayings, a rhetorical performance, a teacher's show.

By not telling us a great deal about Miss Brodie, Spark forces us to become her pupils. Spark never lets us enter Brodie's inner life. We know she desires something, and we know that there is something pathetic and unfulfilled about that desire, but we do not know what it is, exactly, that she desires. Miss Brodie is convinced that she is in her prime, but perhaps, the book suggests, we talk about being in our prime only when we are not in fact in it.

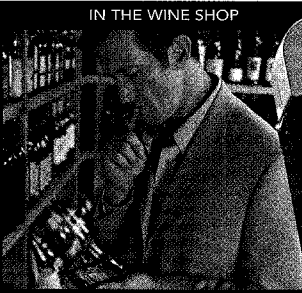
Spark uses a kind of "flash-forward"—a wonderfully flexible and innovative device, also employed in *The Finishing School*—to let us know what will become of some of the schoolgirls in later life. Sandy will eventually become a nun. Mary will die in a fire at the age of twenty-three. The novel's second chapter begins thus:

Mary Macgregor ... had not thought much about Jean Brodie, certainly never disliked her, when, a year after the outbreak of the Second World War, she joined the Wrens, and was clumsy and incompetent, and was much blamed. On one occasion of real misery—when her first and last boy-friend, a corporal whom she had known for two weeks, deserted her by failing to turn up at an appointed place and failing to come near her again—she thought back to see if she had ever really been happy in her life; it occurred to her then that the first years with Miss Brodie ... had been the happiest time of her life. She thought this briefly, and never again referred her mind to Miss Brodie, but had got over her misery, and had relapsed into her habitual slow

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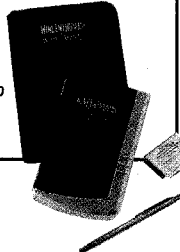
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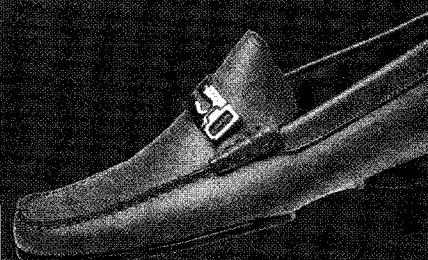


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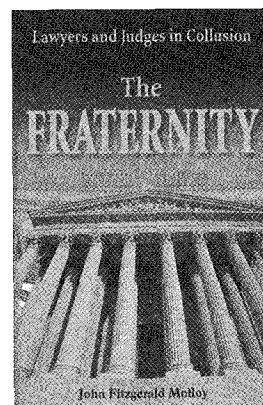
bewilderment, before she died while on leave in Cumberland in a fire in the hotel. Back and forth along the corridors ran Mary Macgregor, through the thickening smoke. She ran one way; then, turning, the other way; and at either end the blast furnace of the fire met her. She heard no screams, for the roar of the fire drowned the screams; she gave no scream, for the smoke was choking her. She ran into somebody on her third turn, stumbled and died. But at the beginning of the nineteen-thirties, when Mary Macgregor was ten, there she was sitting blankly among Miss Brodie's pupils. 'Who has spilled ink on the floor—was it you, Mary?'

There is nothing, alas, as breathtakingly beautiful and careful as this passage in Spark's new novel—and little, in my opinion, to rival it anywhere in modern British fiction. There is no doubt that Spark "kills off" Mary here, and briskly; but is the passage cruel—as readers sometimes feel about Spark—or painfully compassionate? Notice how sternly and swiftly Spark writes that Mary joined the Wrens (the female navy corps) "and was clumsy and incompetent, and was much blamed"—as if to imply that poor Mary was still being judged as quickly and harshly in the armed services as she was at school. Spark savagely controls the dispensation of sentiment: "had relapsed into her habitual slow bewilderment, before she died"; that "before she died" hits us without any preparation, while we are still deciding how to feel about the nasty phrase "her habitual slow bewilderment." The tragedy of Mary Macgregor, it is suggested here, is that, unbeknownst to her, she was in her prime while at school: those were the happiest days of her life, and that life is about to end. And how awful that poor Mary dies as she lived—stupidly, clumsily, in "bewilderment," running foolishly back and forth. Just as we are absorbing this terminal information, Spark pulls us back to Mary's juvenile clumsiness: "Who has spilled ink on the floor—was it you, Mary?"

Many of Spark's novels insist on telling us, either at the start of the book or in the course of it, what will become of the characters many years hence. We learn at the beginning of *The Girls of*

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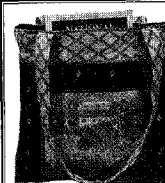
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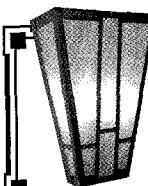
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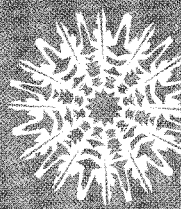
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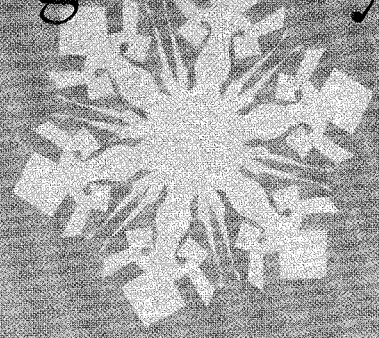
*Slender Means* that one of the protagonists, Nicholas Farrington, will become a missionary and be brutally killed in Haiti, and this foreknowledge shadows our reading of the whole book. Spark has been intensely interested in how our lives are written and how one writes a life. Our lives are "written" because they are foreordained, and free will, once we can see the whole of a life, from start to finish, is an obvious illusion. Mary Macgregor was always going to die at twenty-three in a fire, and Chris was always going to have exactly the kind of literary career he eventually had. But only God and novelists see the whole of a life in this unnatural way. Should novelists do what only God can rightfully do? (Spark, it will be remembered, is a devout Catholic convert.) For what Spark does is also what Miss Brodie does: she bullishly controls her characters, breaking in to tell us what will become of them. Sandy dislikes just this aspect of Miss Brodie, fearing that she wants to act like the predestinating God of Calvinism and decide in advance who will be saved and who will be damned.

One might say that for Spark to control her characters so blatantly while uneasily apologizing for it is contradictory rather than paradoxical, and smacks of having one's cake and eating it. Spark, I think, would reply that the novelist can do nothing else, because she simply has this power over her characters; not to admit it, to hide that control in fathoms of agreeable artifice, is to act in bad faith. (Similar scruples occupy the Ian McEwan of *Atonement*: the heroine of that novel atones for the sin of inventing a lie about people she knew by writing ideal endings for their lives.)

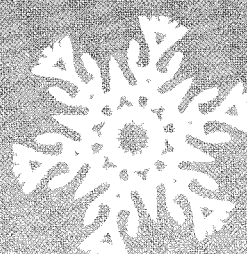
Nearing the conclusion of her career, Spark has returned to these themes in *The Finishing School*—with less success than in the great early novels, but nonetheless interestingly. Chris, the tyro, and Rowland, the failure, argue about these matters. The latter says that his characters always feel free to him (though this, the reader reflects with a smirk, may be because he has not actually ever created any): "The characters take over." Chris, sounding like Spark or Nabokov, disagrees: "They live the



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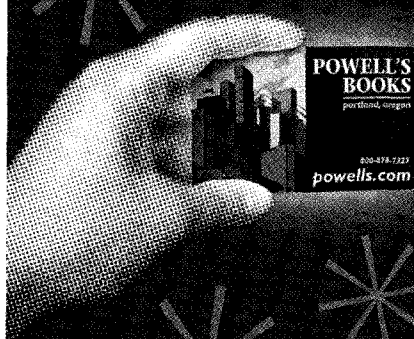
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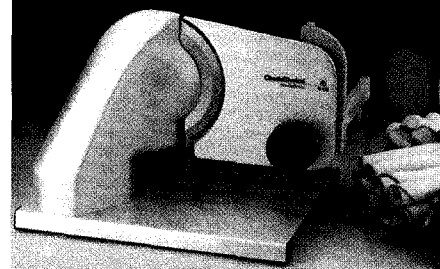
lives I give them ... I'm in full control ... Nobody in my book so far could cross the road unless I make them do it." Spark herself employs a Chris-like control, informing us throughout the book of what will become of her brood. Rowland, we learn, "was in a muddle, which was not to say he would not eventually get out of it, as in fact he was to do by writing a different sort of book." Rowland's wife will leave him and "was to become an art historian, but that was after great effort, and after time ahead." And the students, it seems, will all turn out pretty much as one might expect. Just as, in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, a girl "famous" at thirteen for something will then seem to be fixed for life by that tag, so at the finishing school personalities are already mummified. Spark is amusing on this score, combining a mordancy about contemporary journalism with a sarcasm about the intellectual level of the school's privileged students.

Princess Tilly was writing a thesis on the massacre of the Nepalese royal family in recent years. She had met one of their remote cousins at the Plaza Hotel in New York ... Tilly was already launching herself excellently on her future journalistic career. Rowland marveled as he read her essay. How slick and self-confident these young people were ... How they could cover the pages, juggling the paragraphs around on their p.c.'s and never for a moment thinking that any word could be spelt other than the way they wanted it to be. Tilly "danced" with her friend from "Nipall." Why not? Rowland thought. She will always have an editor to put her story straight.

So the book's title may encode several puns. Chris is puzzling over how to finish his historical novel (like John Fowles in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, he has two different endings), while Rowland is unable to finish anything. A finishing school "finishes" one for adult life, polishes the rough stones into gems; yet how awful to be "finished" in one's late teens—as Princess Tilly is—when one should only be started! And the finishing school is where Rowland's marriage to Nina will finish. Horribly, the Marcia Blaine School for Girls is also, in this grim sense, a "finishing" school, wherein an entire life's course

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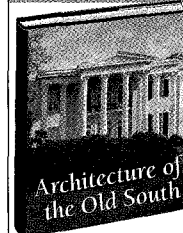
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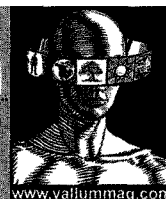
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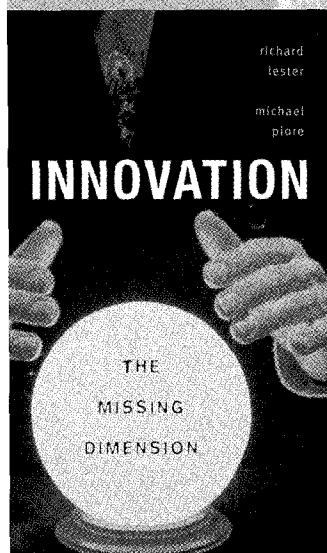
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is preordained. Spark, it seems, not only exercises, however anxiously and self-consciously, an omniscient authorial control, but also has a somewhat austere and limited sense of individual freedom. The Catholic convert from Edinburgh, who has lived many years in relaxed Italy, turns out to wear a Scottish Calvinist corset after all.

In her best books—*Brodie*, *The Girls of Slender Means*, *Memento Mori*—Spark wrings a pathos, if not quite ever a tragedy, from the vision of life's terrible unfreedom, while conducting a deep and parallel examination into the question of authorial control and limit. *The Finishing School* does not belong to that group. Spark seems to want to raise a discussion of how writers create and control characters, but such a discussion gets dispersed and too easily distracted by more-superficial subjects. In particular, Spark's irritation with the current literary scene, its triviality and populism, seems to make her book keep falling into sharp but weightless satire on these matters. (She is very funny about publishers.) Above all, Rowland and Chris seem disembodied, allegorical integers rather than achieved sums. We don't care enough about Rowland's jealousy, or about Chris's ambition—in part because we don't have enough evidence, as readers, to go on. Spark has never been an abundant imaginer; her deliberate deprivations and omissions have always represented a kind of pert challenge to the reader, as if she were saying, "This is all I will give you; make of these rations what you can." In her greatest books that challenge stirs a desire in the reader to complete the circle of which Spark offers a mere crescent, so that we create, in some measure, the characters she only sketches in. How, exactly, she provokes that readerly desire remains something of a mystery. In her new book the challenge is not quite deep enough, and our answer is correspondingly shallow. The omissions seem severe rather than suggestive. *The Finishing School*—surely forgivable from a writer of Spark's advanced seniority—seems not quite finished. But it sheds an interesting if pale retrospective light on this wonderful writer's best book. ■

James Wood is the author of *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (2004).



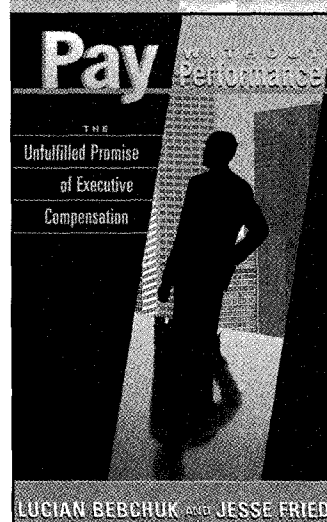
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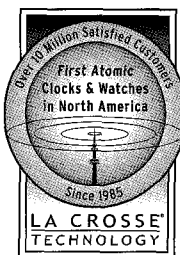
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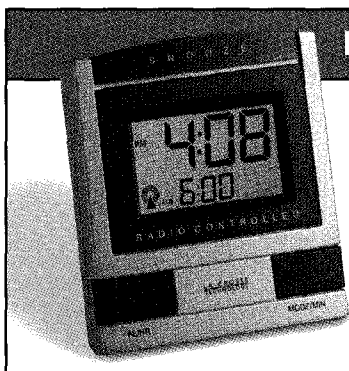
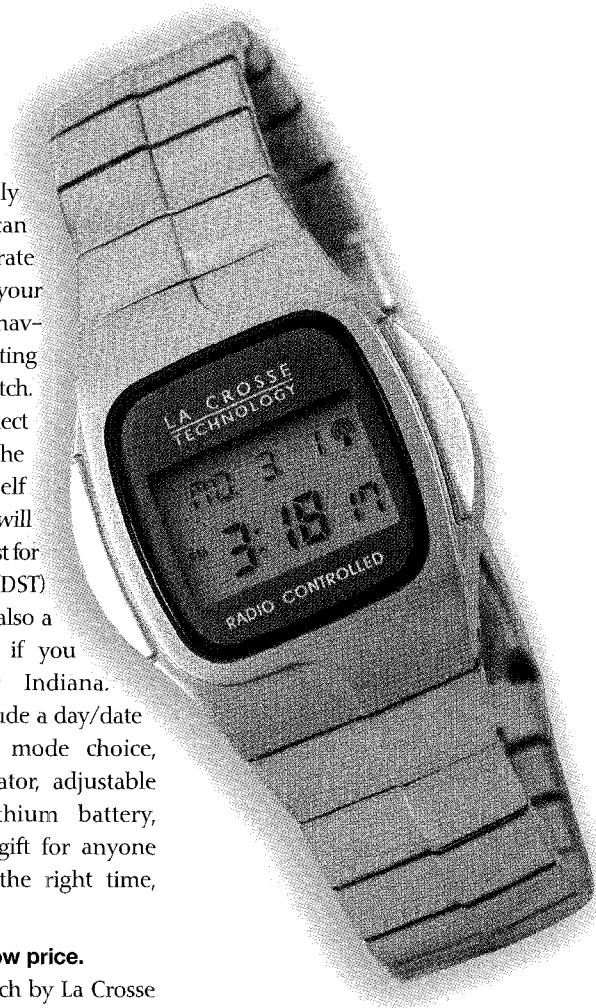
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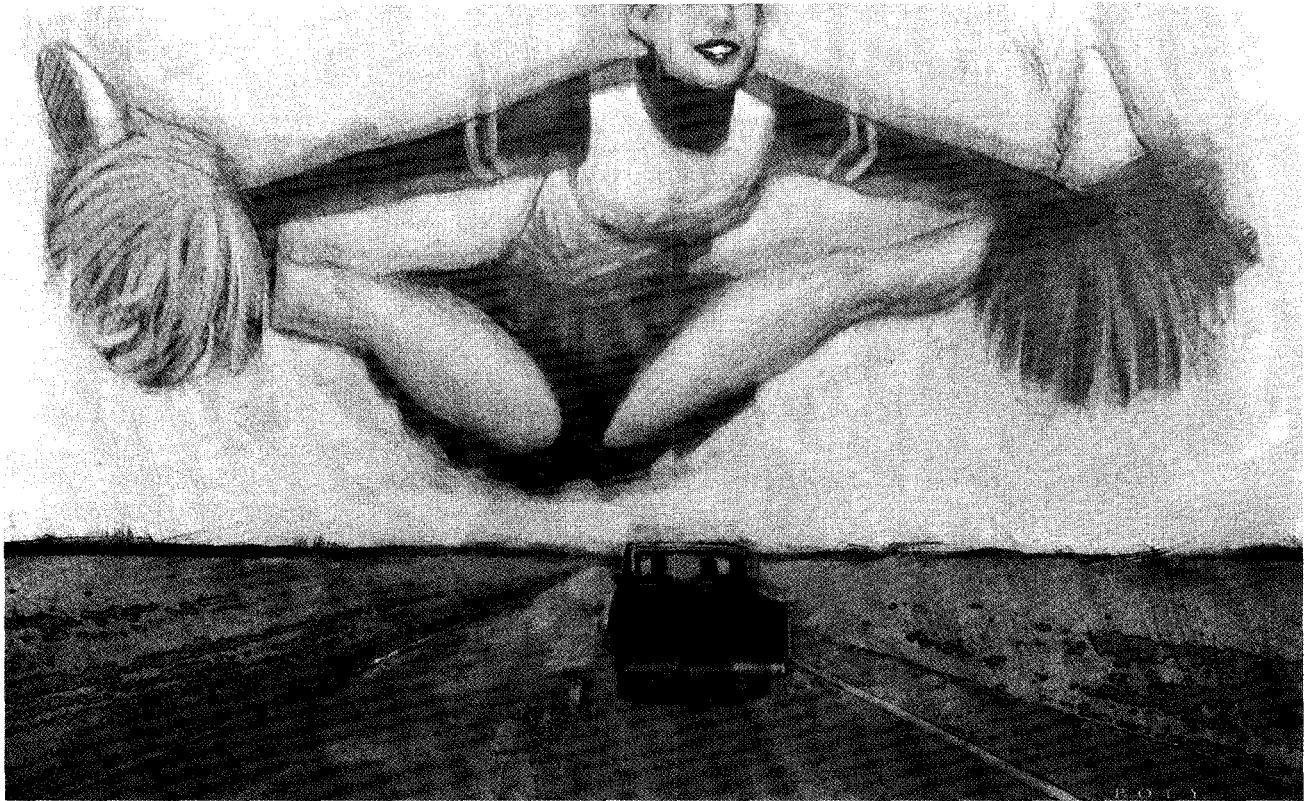
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## SHORT STORY

# Between Here and the Yellow Sea

*Coach and I are driving to Los Angeles to kidnap his daughter*

BY NICOLAS PIZZOLATTO

Interstate 10 after midnight, west-bound. El Paso now. Coach Duprene says he can drive till morning. Blank asphalt rolls ahead, but I'm seeing Amanda, picturing the way she looked in high school: small-chested in a cheer-leading uniform, auburn hair, green eyes, freckles dusting her nose. Grasslands give way to desert, with purple and orange barely visible, hallucinated colors. Then such immensity of night over flat, featureless land that I can see how certain people could fear open spaces.

"You see that?" Coach asks.

"What?"

He uses a bottle of Jose Cuervo to trace an arc across the windshield. "All the stars are gone. It got pitch black."

I stick my head out the window, into explosive air, and he's right. Around us is nothing but darkness, and even though the sky's invisible, I know a storm is coming. "It's going to rain."

He passes the tequila. "How you know?"

I tap a scar under my chin. "Broken jaw."

The metal in my lower jaw twitches, something that happens only when the air is charged with electromagnetism. Steel stitches an X in my mandible because when I was fourteen, convinced of my own possibilities, I tried out for the football team. That was seven years ago. Coach still coached the Port Arthur Toreadors back then. I never made it past tryouts, but I went to a lot of games. I'd be the boy sitting quiet, peeking between loud fathers in front to watch red-and-blue cheerleaders kick and clap. My favorite cheerleader was Coach Duprene's daughter, Amanda. Honey-skinned. Her eyes closed when she smiled. The kind of cheerleader who paid attention, actually cared about the score. She'd follow

the game while the rest of her squad twisted their hair or discussed what to wear to the after party.

"You said it," Coach says, and I wonder if I was thinking out loud. He nods at the windshield, where rain spatters. I'm used to thinking out loud, especially in a moving truck. At this time I still work for Lone Star Environmental, in Port Arthur, and my days are spent driving back roads with a clipboard, noting phosphorus and ammonia levels in the watershed, making sure farmers aren't spreading chicken shit over their fields. In the evening you might catch me at Petro Bowl or Chili's, trying to buy drinks for grade school teachers and secretaries, but at work I drive alone, five to seven hours, and on those days I tend to narrate my thoughts, turning observations into stories. Rilke wrote, "Love your solitude, for solitude is difficult." I remind myself not to think out loud.

Rain builds, and before we reach Las Cruces a torrent lets loose, hiding the road under a curtain of water. Metal writhes in my jawbone. The wipers don't do much, and Coach leans close, squinting. He takes a pill from a brown plastic bottle.

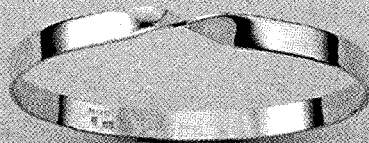


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"It's late enough." He swallows. We pull over onto the shoulder, rain drumming. He slouches against the window and tugs his baseball cap down. Coach doesn't coach anymore, but he receives a generous stipend from Port Arthur High and the honorary title of athletic coordinator, which is what eight district championships and three state titles get you in East Texas. I watch him breathe, softened, rain making the windows look like creeks, and I try to connect this man sleeping so calmly with the man I used to see, the fuming, granite-faced commander on the edges of hallways, on the sidelines of a game. I try to figure how he got from there to here. I do that because at this age one of my essential habits is to look for causal links, find stories, and I spend a great deal of time combing through the past, as if answers were there. I'm at an age when I drive in circles, and I take the words of poets and famous men at face value. I'm four years out of high school, living in the house my grandmother left me, and not until sometime after Coach and I reach Los Angeles will I stop looking for answers.

My cheek rests against the window, because it's cold and dulls my jaw's throbbing. Coach starts to snore.

I was there the day she left. I mowed lawns back then, and on that Sunday I worked the yard next to Coach Duprene's house. A red Chevy Blazer parked in their driveway. Four boys I knew from school were in that truck. The back end sagged with boxes and bags, a surfboard. High school was over, and they were all moving to California. Coach Duprene watched from the porch and didn't wave as the truck rolled away.

Someone, we can now say, should have stopped that Chevy. It's no secret. She makes movies under the name Mandy LeRock. I've seen only one.

Lightning flashes over a plain, lighting my reflection in the rainy window, and I realize I'm not telling the whole story. There are two stories here. In the first I am sitting beside Coach Duprene in his truck. We are driving to Los Angeles to kidnap his daughter.

In the second story, the reflection in the glass, I'm a teenager named Bobby

who lives with two generations of women, a mother and her mother, on empty stretches of grazing land. This boy sleeps in a room with no air-conditioner and mows lawns for spending money. He's a student athlete, but only runs track. His grades are good, and he draws the same picture over and over in his notebooks, from every angle: a Navy destroyer taking counterfire off the coast of South Vietnam.

What joins the stories, their causal link, is Amanda Duprene. We're lab partners freshman year. Biology class is after lunch. I can't stomach dissection exercises, so Amanda handles the cutting. I find refuge from ammonia and formaldehyde in the scent of her hair and neck: shampoo, lotion, sweat. On Fridays she wears her cheerleading uniform. A lot of these long days are eased by watching the sun move over the backs of Amanda's legs, from one o'clock till two. This is the girl I'm searching for.

Later a second search will occur.

It will be undertaken after we get back home, by an investigative firm in Houston whose specialty is locating people. They're called Reunions, Inc.; they charge me \$300 and take two months to produce results. Their report is mailed to me in a big white envelope with the company logo printed on it: two open palms cradling three people, who hold hands under a shining yellow sun.

For now, though, outside Las Cruces, we seem to be parked under a waterfall. Coach snores. I should have brought something to read. This is the snug, familiar isolation I experience at work, when I'm eating my lunch in a truck cab and reading, say, a Saint-Exupéry book about desert pilots. Then I steer the company truck over dirt roads that go on for miles and miles without passing a house, hazy gold cordgrass and grainfields yawning into the horizon; checking groundwater for ammonia spikes and algae blooms; turning to the empty seat beside me, telling my stories.

The countryside ripples with superheated colors. Surfaces look like they were cleared with explosives. We cleaned up at a truck stop in Tuc-



son, and I'm labeling things with brochures we got there. Cholla cactus and greasewood. Sagebrush. Saltbush. All the clouds stack up over one particular peak of the Maricopa Mountains, like a volcano's portrait. At Theba we decide to fish for our dinner. It's late afternoon; a tiny branch of the Gila River splits high green meadow grass.

Coach starts going through a pile of tarp and tools in the bed of his truck. "Can you cast open-face?" he asks.

"No. I don't know anything about fishing."

"Really?"

"No."

"Well. What do you know?"

"Nothing."

"I think I got a closed reel in here. How'd you grow up in Port Arthur and not learn to fish?"

I shrug and let Coach shake his head while he digs for a pole. How should I answer him? Should I tell stories about growing up hearing guys tell fishing stories? The terminology was like secret passwords to me: leaders, streamers, spinners. The grass is tall and soft. The creek makes watery noise and gathers light.

Coach finds a pole and says, "I'll set the line for you."

He shows me how to attach a stone sinker. He demonstrates the best way to get a neon rubber salamander on the hook. The push-button cast is simple. I flick my wrist and the salamander flies, trailing a shimmering filament. Then here we are, Coach Andre Duprene and Robert Corresi, fishing—illegally, I guess—among Joshua trees and painted stones. I watch Coach's wrists, the way his hand starts to call the line back almost as soon as it's cast, and I mimic his movements.

Any coach will tell you that mimicry and repetition are the fundamental learning tools. But what could you mimic if you were a boy waking up for seventeen years in rooms choked by perfumes and powders? Say, for instance, every time your clothes got hung on the line, bras and billowing panties flanked them—the mother's things, skimpy with lace; the grandmother's wide-bottomed and as big as sails. Say certain things were always

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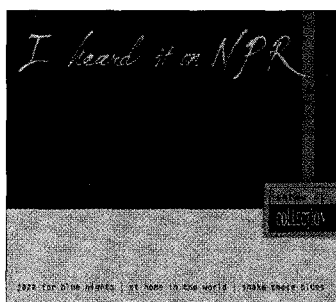
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In the spring of your fourteenth year, two weeks after you've read *In Our Time*, you try out for the football team, and Eric Dempsey breaks your jaw. Next fall Amanda's mother will die.

I'm so lost in reverie that the pole almost flies out of my hand. "Whoa, whoa," I say, and Coach calls for me to pull up, jerk the rod, reel him in. The line flashes, stirs the water, stops. It goes slack and comes back with the salamander shredded. Coach holds the hook up.

"He got a piece of you. When you feel the tug, give it a jerk, make the hook catch. Then work him awhile. Let him wrestle and get the hook dug in worse." Coach puts another salamander on and returns to his spot, about fifty feet away. That tug on the line exhilarates me. For the rest of the evening I've got the pole in my hands, smiling like a goon. Coach catches two trout and I lose two more.

We cook them over a fire that Coach builds in a clearing. He found hot sauce under some clothes in his truck. The sun is almost down. Nine o'clock now. Blue hues.

"Smells good," I say.

"These're fine." Coach has a new pint of Jose Cuervo. The fish pop and crackle. "Well," he says, "I guess we'd better get straight on how we're going to do it."

I nod. The fire makes our faces orange and jumpy.

What we come up with is to locate the address taken from a videotape I have. The address is for American XXX-tasy, the company that makes Amanda's movies. We start there. Find her. Coach stole chloroform from the chemistry lab. Then, he says, he'll hire a deprogrammer. Apparently, a lot of people had to be deprogrammed in the seventies, and

Coach has much faith in this idea.

We sit around a waning fire, sharing the night's second pint of Jose Cuervo. I'm not used to drinking hard stuff. Usually it's just Heineken, while I try to talk to secretaries at Petro Bowl, amid the banging racket of tenpins. "Where do these bottles keep coming from?"

"I went shopping before we left." He lights a cigarette. Coach wears good cowboy boots, maroon eelskins, and a denim shirt he got when he was thinner. He's retained a full head of sandy-gray hair, still kept in its boxy crew cut. He passes the bottle. "You said your dad was military?"

"Navy." I swig the tequila.

"I flew jets, you know."

"I know."

He takes a long drag. "And what happened to him?"

"The USS *Mullinix*. Took counter-battery while retaking Quang Tri. My dad was a chief petty officer. I never met him." This is the story I believed most of my life, and I'm still comfortable telling it. "Travis Corresi was one of five men lost."

"Goddamn," Coach says wistfully, upturning the bottle.

Only five months ago, dying of pancreatic cancer, my grandmother told me that Travis Corresi never served on the USS *Mullinix*. He was just a merchant seaman stationed in Port Arthur for one week in 1973, when my mother was fifteen. They went out only once.

Coach taps ash into the fire. His eyes glisten from a web of wrinkles, and I can imagine an event for each line drawn: flying in Vietnam, coaching the Port Arthur Toreadors for fifteen years, losing a wife named Marguerite to encephalitis, losing his only child to the state of California. The skin around his eyes is a catalogue of gouged disappointments. He takes Vicodin every couple of hours. I think things would be better for him if he had a son.

We get around to discussing the day I broke my jaw.

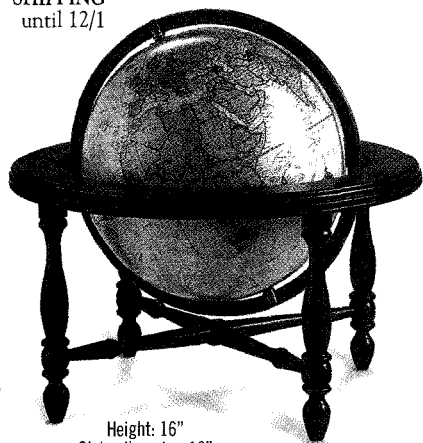
"I remember that," he says. "That was you?" He grins. "Boy, Dempsey laid you out, huh?"

I steer the conversation to Amanda. We start drinking faster.



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His cigarette trembles in his mouth. "You know, she had real joy in her. Maggie used to say"—he takes a long drag and exhales—"that's a happy kid."

I nod. "She was always in a good mood."

"Well." His face puckers. "But she did have a temper. She did have to have things *just so*." Coach makes a mincing motion with his fingers. Our fire is smoldering ash, red glow dying. We're silent until he tosses his smoke and speaks with grim, exhaling effort. "No court would convict us."

"Nope." I remember saying the same thing two nights ago, during the conversation that started all this. We were both drinking alone at Petro Bowl, and I saw a tall boy in a letterman jacket leave a group of teenagers to approach Coach at the end of the bar. These snickering kids watched their friend ask Coach a question. Coach grabbed his throat and threw the boy over a table. I pulled Coach off, and he bucked in my arms until I said into his ear, "Coach. *Coach*. I loved her too." We ended up getting a bottle and sitting in his truck, remembering her loudly.

Coach's head lowers. His hands fall in his lap and he sighs. "When did you say you went out?"

"We didn't. We were just friends."

He nods and hoists himself up by holding on to a tire. He opens the tailgate and climbs in; metal squeaks, junk rattles. He calls out, "Hey—is it kidnapping if you don't ask for a ransom?"

"Yes."

More rattling, and then the steady rasp of his snores. I stir embers with a stick. I want to believe we're doing the right thing—that the girl out west is the same one I knew in high school, and all she really needs is to be reminded of who she is. Rilke said to "raise the submerged sensations of that ample past," but later I'll understand that's slippery advice, because memory can be interpretive. Later I'll realize that the synaptic fields where it lives are the same spaces where longing and desire exist, and sometimes memory is only a vehicle for those things.

But even now, beside the cooling ash of our campfire, I don't trust my motivations. That's one of my basic



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traits, and it's mostly rooted in a broken jaw—the small metal cross in my chin reminding me that what I want and what I'm entitled to are traditionally separate things. To understand what I mean, you have to imagine me at fourteen: five foot eight, a hundred and thirty pounds, in oversized shoulder pads and a helmet I can remove without unsnapping it.

April sun smothers the field. Cheerleaders sit in the bleachers, evaluating the world and hiding cigarettes. I chew my mouthpiece compulsively. I've been reading about Nick Adams and going to war and getting shot. I meet derisive stares, knowing I have my ethos, imagining theories about pain and honor. When we move to open-field tackling, I'm first to volunteer.

Coach Duprene sets me against Eric Dempsey, a six-foot-something senior who's an all-district linebacker. This may be cruel. At the time, though, I think, *He's taking me seriously. He's giving me a chance.*

When the whistle blows, Coach tosses Eric the ball. I don't hesitate. I get my center of gravity low and straighten my spine by sinking my head into my shoulders and looking upward. I don't swerve or go for his knees.

A sudden gust and I actually hear myself break. Red, shocking pain. I roll over on the ground, sun stabbing my eyes, grass in my mouth, warm copper tastes, dirt. Before I black out, I glimpse the girls in the bleachers, little dots of color all in a line.

So, at twenty-one, I imagine life's chief lesson is that you have to limit your longing, or it can fester until it gets your jaw broken. That twitching metal cross stains my expectations with dread. My eyes dart around in the dark. A log, a moon, noise of wind over rock. Coach cutting Zs. Imagined sounds echo in my ears: the clatter of bowling pins falling, artillery booming into a destroyer's foredeck. My jaw sleeps. No rain.

Telephone poles resemble crosses in the sun. A large green sign says WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA. Coach's head dips and rises. I think he's taking more Vicodin.

"This is the farthest west I've ever been," I say.

Coach stares silent and bleary at the road. He fiddles with the radio and finds Merle Haggard singing "Mama Tried." The day her mother died, the intercom called Amanda out of history class. The way she gathered up her books, I knew she was expecting this. I watched her leave from the window, wanting to reach through it as she crossed the concrete walkway. Her sadness felt so real to me, so close.

At San Diego we take Highway 15 north. Later we rise into an elevated space of signs: slogans and bold primary colors. Vehicles swarm us. I wonder if my mother made it this far. Her first postcards came from Nevada. There are five postcards altogether, kept in a shoebox on the floor of my closet. Suppose one day near the end of senior year you came home and your mother was gone. Your grandmother explained that your mom would be away for a while. A cryptic note began "Now that you're seventeen," and talked about each person having to "follow their own heart." Phone calls came once a week for the next two months.

I don't look at the postcards anymore. The shoebox stays closed.

Cars pull us and we merge, rising higher on the concrete slope. Below us parking lots are everywhere, as if we were flying over a city of parking lots. The air becomes a radiant gloom, a bleached fog. Enormous buildings vanish into this haze. Something is burning—the odor is that of something stale, decomposing.

Coach's face crinkles. "Smells terrible." His words slur. A Volvo honks as we drift into the wrong lane. In February of my senior year a story was told in the track team's locker room. They said Amanda had gotten wild. She rode back from a basketball game on the team bus, and something crazy happened. Howls and laughter. I dressed in a hurry, trying not to believe this.

The truck squeals onto the shoulder. Coach slams it into park. "We need to figure out where the hell we are." His pupils float in bloody murk. "You— you gotta drive."

I sink into the driver's seat. The



engine rumbles and Coach slumps against the window. With my hands on the wheel, I feel new and worthy. This is what we see: Dry concrete reservoirs, asphalt everywhere, heat-warped air. Mexicans. People wearing sunglasses that make them look like insects. Convenience stores and billboards—pictures of bronze, muscled flesh, cleavage. I glance at my slight, pale biceps.

Once I saw Amanda crossing a flooded football field, kicking up water with her bare feet, and I devised a year-long muscle-building program. Self-improvement notes still litter my house: "A fragment of sacred duty saves you from great fear." "All pain is the result of desire." "People are generally as happy as they choose to be." But sometime after Los Angeles, I get rid of those notes. Papers crackle as I crush them, and my footsteps boom on hardwood floors throughout my house.

At a gas station Coach waits in the truck while a Persian helps me with the map. He says the zip code, 91411, is "in the valley." We have to go farther west.

Coach pops two Vicodins. Streets and sidewalks radiate heat like a skillet.

American XXXtasy is part of a strip mall in the San Fernando Valley. The sign is a simple red-letter job on smoky glass doors, tinted so you can't see inside. A few cars in the parking lot. Dusk. A hillock rises at the far end of the mall, and on top sits a T.C.I. Friday's. Coach has been staring out the window. He raps his fingernails against the door and rubs the brown bottle of chloroform. He hasn't spoken since I got directions.

"Stay here, why don't you?" I say. "Let me go see what I can find out."

He stumbles out, head down. "I'm going in."

"Look, Coach. Let me talk to them—I'll make up a story. Trust me, I sort of got a plan." I ask him for his driver's license and tell him again to trust me. I leave him leaning against the truck.

The office has lime-green carpeting, stamped down and pocked with cigarette burns. It smells vaguely like rubbing alcohol and Vaseline. A door

behind the front desk is closed. Posters decorate the walls: *The Goddaughter Part II*, *Back-Ended to the Future*, and one of Mandy LeRock wearing a transparent raincoat and standing under an umbrella—*Rainwoman 5: Eye of the Storm*. Those aren't her breasts. A receptionist greets me, an older woman with overcooked skin—orange, papery. She wears flared eyeglasses.

"Can I help you?"

Smiling, I show our driver's licenses. "We're both from Port Arthur, Texas. We drove a long, long way."

"What is it you want?"

"Do you see that man out there?" Beyond the window Coach slumps on his tailgate, puffing out wafts of smoke. "His daughter is an actress." I point to the *Rainwoman* poster. "Her real name is Amanda Duprene. She's from Texas. We're looking for her."

"I'm sorry, we're not allowed to—"

"Ma'am. We don't want to make trouble. But it's—the thing is ... he's dying. He's dying and he just wants to see his only daughter before he goes."

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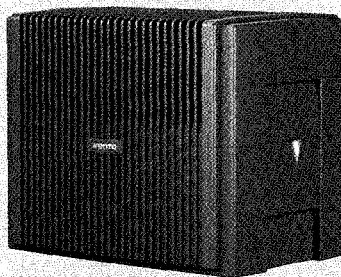
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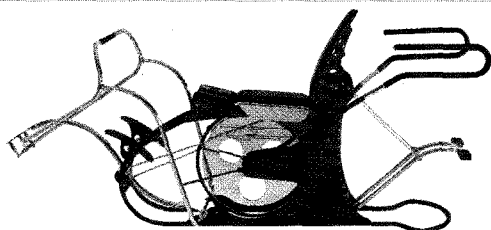
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She looks past me, out the window. In the parking lot Coach appears folded. His back is bowed and he coughs into his hand, smoke blanketing him and dissolving into dusklight. He really does look sick.

"We're trying to find her. That's all. We're not making trouble for anybody."

For some reason she whispers. "What is it?"

"What?"

"What does he have?"

"Pancreatic cancer."

"Oh, Lord." She puts her hand to her mouth. "Just a minute. Okay? I'll be right back." She takes our licenses and walks to the back room, opening the door only wide enough to step through. A moment later she reappears. "Sir? You can come in." My heart skips, but through the door is just another desk with a thin young man behind it. A bag from McDonald's spills french fries across his desk.

His face is acne-scarred. He scans our licenses. "Are you for real?" he says, sucking his fingertips. The receptionist clasps her hands in the doorway.

I tell the story of Coach's cancer while eyeing stacks of videotapes on the desk, explaining how difficult it was to drive the old man here from Port Arthur. The man chews fries as I talk. At the end he asks me for a contact number and says the most he can do is pass the message along to Amanda. He's sorry, they can't just give out addresses, *especially* to family.

The woman catches me at the outer door. She passes me a slip of yellow paper. "You don't know where this came from," she says, and pats my arm. On the paper is an address.

Coach nods and falls into his seat. Back on the highway he stares at the chloroform and says, "I don't know. I don't know about this."

It takes us another two hours to find the address.

A ranch-style house in Van Nuys. Palmetto and ferns, palm trees with ridged skin and no foliage. A yellow Corvette in the driveway. From a bay window pale, lemon-colored light lies in three rectangles on the trim green lawn. Around are similar houses, warm



air. We park across the street and turn off the lights.

"So what do you want to do?"

His head, reclined, turns slowly. "Go home."

"C'mon. Do we go to the door? Do we wait to see if she comes out?"

His eyes are lacquered dots, absorbed by wrinkles and folds.

"Coach?"

He closes his eyes. Laborious breaths. "Go see."

"Me?"

"Go see." He brandishes the chloroform in some gesture of reassurance.

The porch light is off, and a dim pink glow emits from the doorbell. I walk toward it, through darkness between windows, the doorbell like the end of a tunnel.

I would watch her green eyes, the smile that always closed them. I remember her face lit by a Bunsen burner's quivering flame, laughter bursting from her like confetti. Once, I saw her slap Junior Wendell's hand away from her skirt, and I felt the confinement of a teenage girl. The way her mind was full of longings—a knot of emotions constantly rising to the surface, washing over her, carrying her through a harrowed suburban field, past the shopping mall and long acres of blue-stem grass, into the back seats of cars, truckbeds.

I knock. Again. "Who is it?" comes from behind the heavy wood.

"Amanda Duprene?"

"Who is it?" the voice repeats.

"Um ... Robert Corresi? From Port Arthur?" A porch light ignites and brightness blinds me. The movie I own is called *The Devil's Garage*, and it has the smooth, false texture of something shot on video. The star of the story needs to get her car fixed, but doesn't have enough money. The door opens the length of a chain lock, and a dog's black nose sniffs the gap. A pair of brown eyes, female and bloodshot, glide over me. The door closes, and I hear metal sliding loose.

In the second it takes for the door to swing wide, I become conscious of my looks, until I remember that I don't have acne anymore and my haircut is better than it was in high school.

# JOHN CHRISTIAN

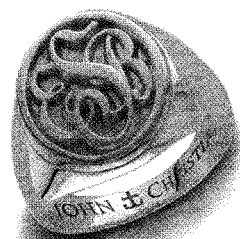
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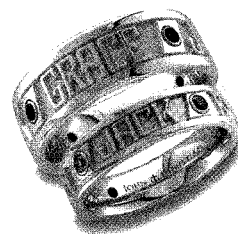
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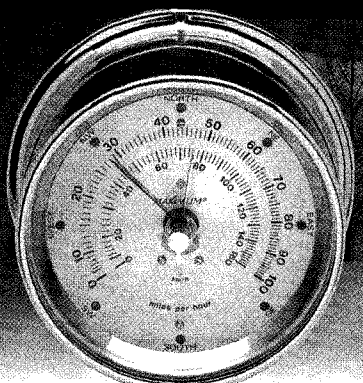
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She has dark skin, and her reddish hair is pulled back. She holds a large brown Rottweiler by its collar. Light from inside silhouettes her, making her robe almost translucent blue. Her voice is familiar but rawer, deep. "I know you."

She manifests from the light, becoming solid, as if stepping from the place where I keep her in my mind. Her eyebrows are plucked into precise waves; her cheeks and chest shine with lotion. She stares, eyes fractured with red, and tilts her head. "I know you."

"Robert. From high school? We were lab partners?"

The dog whines, and she crouches to scratch its ears. "Hush, Pete." She looks up. "Bobby? Bobby Corresi?"

"Robert. Nobody calls me Bobby anymore."

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you. We've been driving."

She glances over my shoulder. "Who's we?"

"Me and your father. Your dad's here. We drove to see you—"

"What?" Amanda moves past me, and I see Coach standing in the dark behind his truck, only bare hints of him visible. She points furiously in his direction. "What did you bring him here for? What do you want? Get him out of here!"

Before I can reply, a man steps onto the porch. He is about my height, but with hard muscles and toasted skin. He wears a white tank top, jogging pants, and lots of earrings. His short, glossy hair stands up straight. He puts an arm around Amanda's waist and stares at me. "What's going on, babe?"

She barely regards him. "Nothing." Back to me, she asks, "What did you bring him here for?" She yells over my shoulder. "Stay over there! You don't come near this house!" Her dog keeps hopping up, lunging and choking himself on his own collar, barking at the frenzy in her voice. The man next to her shifts his eyes from me to Coach and back again. Through all this I notice with somber clarity how sweet she smells.

She looks at me, accusing. "What?"

"Amanda. Can I talk to you? Please—"

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just for a second. We really drove a long way. I just want to talk."

Her eyes narrow suspiciously, and her dog sniffs my crotch.

"Please."

She huffs loud. "Hold on." And she shuts the door and leaves me standing in a cone of light on her porch. Murmurs come from inside the house. Coach's cigarette smoke plumes up on the far side of his truck like a phantom tulip.

When the door opens again, Amanda points over my shoulder. "He can't come in. He stays outside." The man beside her walks out the doorway and bumps hard into my shoulder, passing. "Tony's going to wait out here too." He positions himself behind me with his arms crossed.

She and the dog step to one side, and I move into a foyer with a dried-flower arrangement standing on a nice marble table, and then into diffused light and the scent of incense, jasmine maybe, a television's flickering blue in a living room of brown, thick-cushioned furniture. Maroon walls, pictures of landscapes, some odor lingering from the kitchen. Amanda mutes the TV.

She motions me to the couch and curls her legs beneath her, covering them with the robe. Pete the dog lies on a cushion between us. I feel my chest tightening. Her lips look bee-stung, and I suppose it's collagen or something. Her breasts are too round and firm under the robe. Her eyes are brown.

"Okay," she says. "I'll give you five minutes."

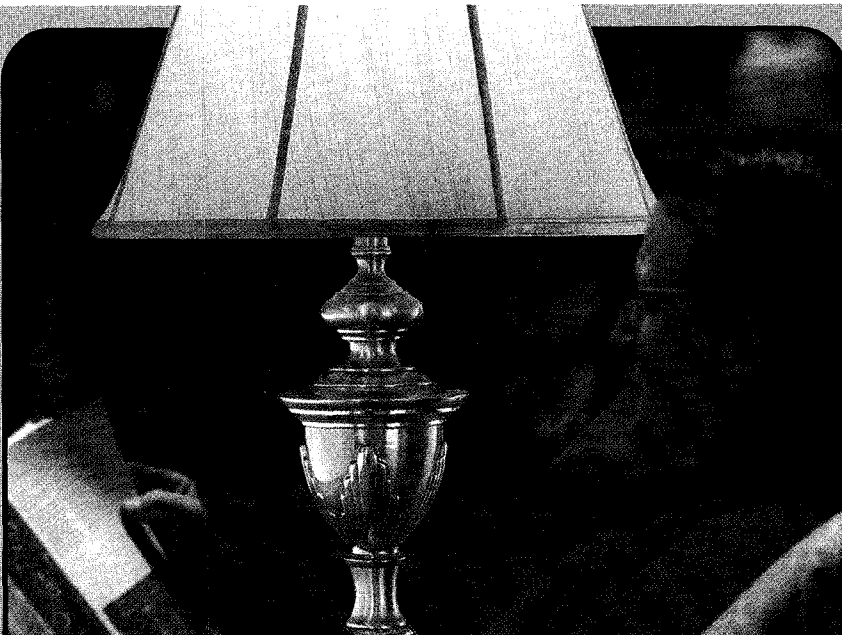
"We just—I mean, I came here to help you, I guess. We want to bring you home."

She rolls her eyes and laughs. "Right. Whatever. Perfect."

"Look—"

"You look. What do you think—are you judging me? You bring my dad out here, and, and what—" she rubs her nose and talks fast. Even though it's cool in here, beads of sweat have broken across her brow. "I mean, what do you know? We're, like, lab partners freshman year? So you know me or something?" She has heavy gray rings under her eyes. I can't get over her eyes.

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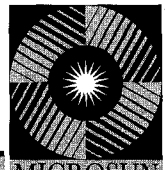
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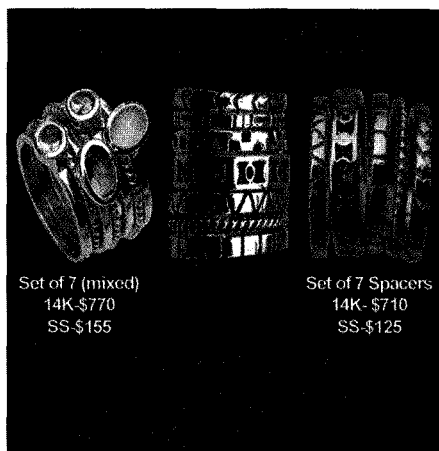
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"No." The question confuses her. "Look." She makes an encompassing gesture over the room. "Do I look like I need help?" She scratches the dog. "I mean, I haven't done drugs in almost a year." She stares at her toenails, painted purple. On her ankle is a cuneiform tattoo. "I haven't made a movie in four months. I mean, I don't think I'm even going to again. Probably. I've got offers for, like, TV and stuff." She tugs her hair and brushes something off a sofa cushion. I remember the hair-tugging. She always did do that. There's so little I recognize here.

"But you're not happy. You're better than this—"

She throws up her hands. "See? This is what I'm talking about. You come out here and what, because you don't like the way I live my life?"

"Come on—"

"No. You come on. Really, Bobby. I have news for you. The world's a lot bigger than Port Arthur, Texas. Okay? A lot bigger. How I make my living isn't your business, and it sure as hell isn't that asshole out there's."

"Tony?"

She frowns sarcastically. "My dad." She rubs her nose. "But it's my life. Mine. You need to worry about your life, right? Do I tell you how to live your life? What do you do, anyway?"

I hesitate a moment. "I work for Lone Star Environmental. I monitor groundwater."

She claps. "Wow. Super. Never left town, right? Never went to college, right?"

"I don't know, not yet, but—"

She puts her head in one hand and laughs. "I cannot believe you actually came all the way out here. I cannot believe you brought my father here." She stares hard at me. "You've got a lot of nerve."

I look at the pictures on her walls, paintings of peaceful vistas and lonesome shorelines, and all I can think of is to try and convince her of what I still know. "I saw you once. It was sophomore year. Early sophomore year. I guess you didn't have eighth hour back then, but it had just rained, and I was waiting for the bell to ring, you know? Bored, the sky that weird gray,

sunshine but no blue, and I just wanted to go home."

She picks at her thumbnail.

I keep my eyes on the landscapes while I talk. "And I looked out the window, and I saw you. You were walking across the football field in your uniform, and you'd taken your shoes off—and you were taking your time, kicking up water with your toes. I could see little splashes of it. You would spin around now and then. You were looking up at the sky, and in the glass I'd lose you in the sun. You know, where the sun flared up in the glass? And you'd step out of the light, kicking water, in your skirt, looking really distracted. And it wasn't that you were beautiful—you were, but it wasn't that." All my stored years coagulate into language, and I believe she can yet be reclaimed. "I remember thinking that I knew what was distracting you. You know? Even though I couldn't name it, or put words to it, I had this sense, this real calm feeling, and I used to be pretty nervous, I guess, but a feeling—like the world was a good place, because I could see it with your eyes."

The dog seeks my leg and whines a faint, choked sob. A newscaster tells a silent story on TV.

She closes her robe some and touches my cheek. "Bobby. Look, you're a sweetheart. I mean it." She wipes her eyes with a tiny laugh that almost echoes the one I remember. "I'm sure I was just high, though. I was taking a lot of acid back then."

Her fingers trace my jawline, stopping under my chin. "You're sweet. But you need to take care of your life."

Because there's nowhere to look but at her, I close my eyes.

This is where all my stories converge. Every lost moment between experience and memory meets at a crossroads: at the metal X in my jaw, where her fingers sit like a shotgun barrel.

"Can I have five more minutes?"

"No."

Someone shouts, and I open my eyes.

We move outside, where the noise came from. In the near distance, just beyond the porch light, Coach sits on



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the lawn, holding his face. Tony looms over him, fists clenched.

Tony sticks out his jaw. "He said he was going inside. I told him no."

It's hard not to pity Coach, crumpled on the lawn that way, struggling with a palm over his eye, but I manage. I walk over, and Tony steps in front of me. "You want some?"

"Tony," Amanda calls behind me. "Come on. It's all right. Come inside."

Coach sprawls at my feet, holding the chloroform out like some impotent offering. The front door shuts.

I tell Coach to get in the truck.

In the driver's seat, I toss the chloroform out the window. He slumps against his door with a bruise swelling over his left eye. "This really worked out great," he snaps.

I study him, tracing the lines on his face with my eyes, and keep staring after he meets my look. He stares at the window, and I watch him for a few moments before turning the key.

The engine turns over, stuttering, and we move forward.

A second search will occur. In Port Arthur I see an advertisement for Reunions, Inc. Because there is still one question to answer, one piece of unknown I will not abide, I call them. For two months following I continue to work for Lone Star Environmental, letting the vacuous fields and long, empty skies pass by like frames of overexposed film, telling no stories, taking soil samples and testing air with my nose for signs of contamination. Only occasionally during this period do I reflect on Coach Duprene.

We made the drive back in silence. I drove, and Coach kept his face to the window. Red-clay mesas and purple skylines. Half-conceived mountains in distant mist. His guilt as certain as the road beneath our wheels.

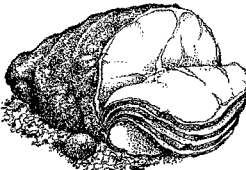
I will not see him again.

Reunions, Inc., returns the report that cost me \$300. The envelope sits on my kitchen table for an entire day. The company's logo seems to be trying to stare me down. After five beers I open the envelope and remove two sheets of paper. This is what they say:

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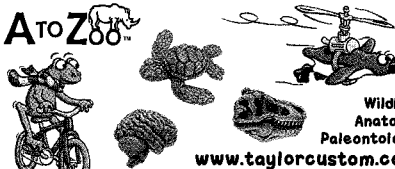
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ond mate on the SS *Mary Charles*, a trading ship that went down in the Yellow Sea in 1989. But I'd always known that. All my life my father had died at sea.

Tearing down every bit of philosophy, every maxim in the house, I crush the notes, making a single bundle, and decide that everything that has gone before is one story, the same long one, and if it doesn't end, then the next decade may be like the last one, a period of anxious stillness that sees you crouched, nervous, like a mouse in a corner, leaves you mourning a life you never really had.

That life is fragmented into scenes you barely recall, their significance due only to their lack of competition, until this life, these moments, become like a pair of green eyes you're convinced you once saw, blinking at you in the sky of a long, wandering night, when you wondered what you were doing driving this late, and how you'd make it home. Years you can't remember, because you were too busy disguising true sadness as trumped-up nostalgia.

So the house is up for sale. Last night you decided not to pack anything, and spent time staring at the long, fenced prairie across the street.

Now you might picture your next story, your second one, but don't be too definite, don't make a vision you might cling to, or create an idea you lose yourself in. Don't look at a map and ponder the depth of the Yellow Sea; don't imagine the shapes of its waves. Don't contemplate lost parents or lost girls. Resist the urge to explain their stories, because eventually you've got to understand that an answer isn't the same thing as a solution, and a story is sometimes only an excuse.

If you have to, let yourself imagine the mood of this story, the places it might happen, what the weather will be like. Tell yourself it will be a world, at least, where you're less abandoned, and sustained by more than illusion. If you have to.

Just leave before you change your mind. ▀

*Nicolas Pizzolatto is a Walton fellow at the University of Arkansas, where he is completing a novel and a collection of stories. His story "Ghost-Birds" appeared in the October 2003 Atlantic.*

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# PURSUIITS & RETREATS

NOVEMBER 2004 | THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY

INNOCENT BYSTANDER

## Let Someone Else Do It

*The impulse behind everything*

BY CULLEN MURPHY

The terminology of economics—"marginal utility," "vertical equity," "asymmetric information"—is not, by and large, the stuff of deep public passion. But in recent years one economic term has become hot to the touch. The term is "outsourcing," which refers to the spinning off of job functions from one place to another, and especially to the export of jobs from high-wage America to low-wage countries such as India and China. Both presidential candidates have expressed concern about outsourcing, which has devastated some of the most vigorously contested swing states, even as economists debate the overall pluses and minuses of outsourcing in the long run. What nobody disputes is that outsourcing has been occurring, that the pace is picking up, and that it affects all economic sectors and levels of management. Indeed, much of the job of President of the United States seems to have been outsourced to a lower-wage Vice President.

But it would be a mistake to think of outsourcing as simply an economic transaction; it is a universal tendency, like gravity, that exerts a pull on everything. It may be helpful to think in terms of a fourth law of thermodynamics. The first law, you'll recall, holds that the amount of matter and energy in the universe is constant. The second holds that the default direction of everything is toward entropy. The third law ... well, never mind. The fourth

law, newly postulated, holds that outsourcing—getting others to do things for you—is the intrinsic vector of all human activity.

National governments, for instance, once cherished their vaunted "monopoly on violence"; this was among the chief attributes of sovereignty. The war in Iraq has made Americans aware of the extent to which military functions have been outsourced to corporations like Halliburton, Bechtel, and DynCorp. Of course, armies never provided everything for themselves (the toilet paper inside meals-ready-to-eat, for example,

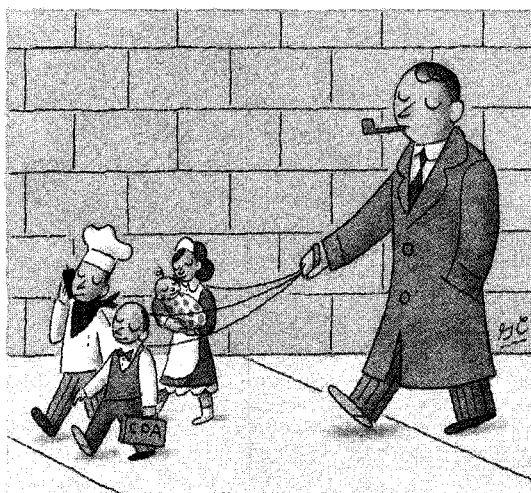
educating Iraqis about the virtues of democracy has been outsourced—in this instance not to an American company but to a British public-relations firm, Bell Pottinger, which received a \$5.6 million contract to produce promotional commercials for use on Iraqi television. (Bell Pottinger's chairman, Lord Tim Bell, previously oversaw publicity for Margaret Thatcher.)

Outsourcing extends into areas one might never have expected. The United States, seemingly self-sufficient in its own territory, has been outsourcing itself for years, at least when it comes to movie and television locales. New York

is often played by (cheap) Toronto. The Appalachian settings in the movie *Cold Mountain* were played by (even cheaper) Romania. It used to be that standing in line for a driver's license or a government hearing, or to buy tickets, was the sort of thing one pretty much had to do for oneself. This function, too, is outsourceable. Today the "service expeditor" industry provides human substitutes (for up to \$30 an hour) who will save a place until your turn arrives. It's

hard to see how this industry could ever be moved offshore to people in Thailand or Indonesia, but God help anyone needing a license if it is.

According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the diploma-mill industry is being outsourced. There have long been unaccredited educational institutions in America willing for a fee to offer fast-track doctorates, and fly-by-night companies willing to send out handsome facsimile transcripts ("for amusement purposes only"), but the nation's homegrown diploma mills are now being undermined by competi-



comes from a \$1.4 million contract to the Rose Resnick Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, in Oakland), but core military functions such as building bases, guarding depots, and conducting surveillance are increasingly private-sector affairs. So, too, sometimes, is torture, as the Abu Ghraib scandal reveals, although the more common practice is for squeamish governments (i.e., ours) to outsource problematic interrogations to less squeamish governments (Cairo, Manila)—a practice that goes by the artfully bland term "rendition." Even the political task of

GREG CLARKE

## 60 YEARS AGO IN THE ATLANTIC

*"What to Do With German Prisoners: The American Muddle"*

*News reports and special investigations have detailed American incompetence, mismanagement, and outright cruelty toward detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq. Devising fair and effective methods for dealing with POWs has always been problematic. In the November 1944 Atlantic, James H. Powers, The Boston Globe's foreign editor, took the U.S. Army to task for putting German prisoners in the hands of its least competent officers. The result, Powers argued, was that rules were not being enforced, and avid Hitler adherents were treating their captors with disrespect and tormenting fellow prisoners.*

**T**he United States Army has been coöperative and open-minded in its general policy regarding public interest in prisoner-of-war problems. Visits and studies by penologists, representatives of the press, and others are numerous. Yet little has been done to relate these reports one to another, to assemble pertinent evidence regarding desirable changes, and to draw the necessary conclusions. Until some such comprehensive analysis is undertaken, the administrative defects and weaknesses of policy now apparent will persist.

The assumption is all too prevalent in the Service Command that the prisoner-of-war problem is unimportant and can be relegated to officers who do not fit well elsewhere. This view of the P.O.W. camp as the incompetent officer's last hope persists, despite brilliant exceptions. It should be ended at once. Soundness in the policy applied to the P.O.W.'s in this country, efficiency of the administration which governs them, and a high standard of competence, character, and experience in officers charged with the responsibility of the task—all these must be achieved, even if it implies drastic revisions of present procedure.

Attitudes toward prisoners among camp guards and other camp personnel should be firmer and more objective. Prisoners, especially German noncoms, should not be permitted to set the tone of that relationship. No provision of the Geneva Convention requires that they retain their own importance or prerogatives.

[VOLUME 174, NO. 5, PAGE 50]

tion from abroad. The Jerusalem-based University Degree Program has sold more than 30,000 advanced degrees of various kinds, from nonexistent institutions such as Ashbourne University and the University of Palmers Green. (There is even a phone number employers can call to confirm a job applicant's claims.) A China-based company called BackAlleyPress.com sells official-looking fake transcripts from real universities, custom-made to suit every educational need.

Demographic realities create urgent outsourcing needs. The shortage of Catholic priests in America has resulted in a grave backlog of prayers and masses. When the devout request special prayers of thanksgiving or remembrance, often to be said for years at a time, the requests (and monetary offerings) are increasingly outsourced to India, whose Catholic priests are giving the notion of service expediter a whole new dimension. Asked about this by *The New York Times*, a spokesman for the Catholic Church commented, "The prayer is heartfelt, and every prayer is treated as the same whether it is paid for in dollars, euros, or rupees."

If spiritual succor can be outsourced, so, presumably, can other ineffable qualities and pursuits. A bit of a fuss was caused some years ago when it was revealed that clergymen in the United States had been outsourcing their sermons—buying them from an online "sermon mill." But the entire range of human expression, from toasts by a best man to eulogies by a grieving friend, can now be acquired at a factory outlet. InstantWeddingToasts.com sells fill-in-the-blank templates to help clients create a memorable wedding speech. "In about five painless minutes, you'll have a wedding speech ready to go ... without writing!"

In America we've been outsourcing the idea of personal responsibility for years. The old-fashioned moral stance is the one articulated in *Julius Caesar*: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in the stars but in ourselves." That was before the "Twinkie defense," which attributed a murderer's actions to elevated blood-sugar levels brought on by vigorous snacking on junk food. The dispositions

of diet, the lash of upbringing, the twist of genetics—targets of other-directed blame have become only more plentiful. A killer in Eustis, Florida, cited the fantasy role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade* as the catalyst of the alleged mental illness that formed the basis of his defense. In another case, according to a newspaper account, a man in Panama City, Florida, "claimed drinking jasmine tea caused him to go temporarily insane before he smashed his way into a neighbor's house and chased the woman with a large dagger." The charges against him were dropped.

**O**utsourcing has been with us from the very beginning. Think of slavery, a fundamental form of outsourcing. On a macro scale, the great imperial systems of history have been exercises in outsourcing. No doubt one of the earliest forms of outsourcing was the delegation of one's intellectual chores to a support staff of consultants.

Middle-class Americans today have typically outsourced a vast proportion of child care, food preparation, and money handling. With the help of personal concierges, many higher-end Americans also have outsourced the great bulk of their interpersonal relationships. Reproduction itself is often outsourced (by means of sperm and egg donors and *in vitro* fertilization), and people needing various kinds of human tissue for purposes of repair increasingly seek outsourced components in the developing world, where life is cheap and so are kidneys.

And I must confess that much of this column was in fact outsourced to subcontracting facilities in Bangalore and Nogales, where I've been told that quality control is adequate and language issues should present no cause for concern. To be sure, there are glitches still to be worked out (for instance, the previous sentence originally came off the assembly line as "where I've been told that quality control is jolly good and language issues should present *no problema*"). But I can assure you that the sentiments expressed herein remain heartfelt, whether paid for in dollars, euros, or rupees. ▀

*Cullen Murphy is The Atlantic's managing editor.*



# The Thieves of Baghdad

*Everyone knows about the looting of Iraq's museums during last year's war. What almost no one knows is that most of the museums' holdings had been stolen and sold years before—and not by mobs of Iraqis off the street*

BY LAUREN SANDLER

One afternoon in April of last year, archaeologists from all over the world streamed into the plush new auditorium of the British Museum for a conference on the cultural reconstruction of Iraq. Donny George, the stout, graying Iraqi who had become the public face of Iraq's National Museum, gave a detailed report on the infamous looting of the museum three weeks earlier, following the fall of Baghdad. Some 170,000 pieces—a collection of antiquities that together documented the beginning of civilization—had been stolen, he told the group. George, then the director of research and publications in Iraq's Department of Antiquities and now the director of Iraq's museums, solemnly removed his glasses and scanned the audience. "This was a professional job," he said. "They knew what they were taking." He held up a red glass cutter. "These were people who were prepared."

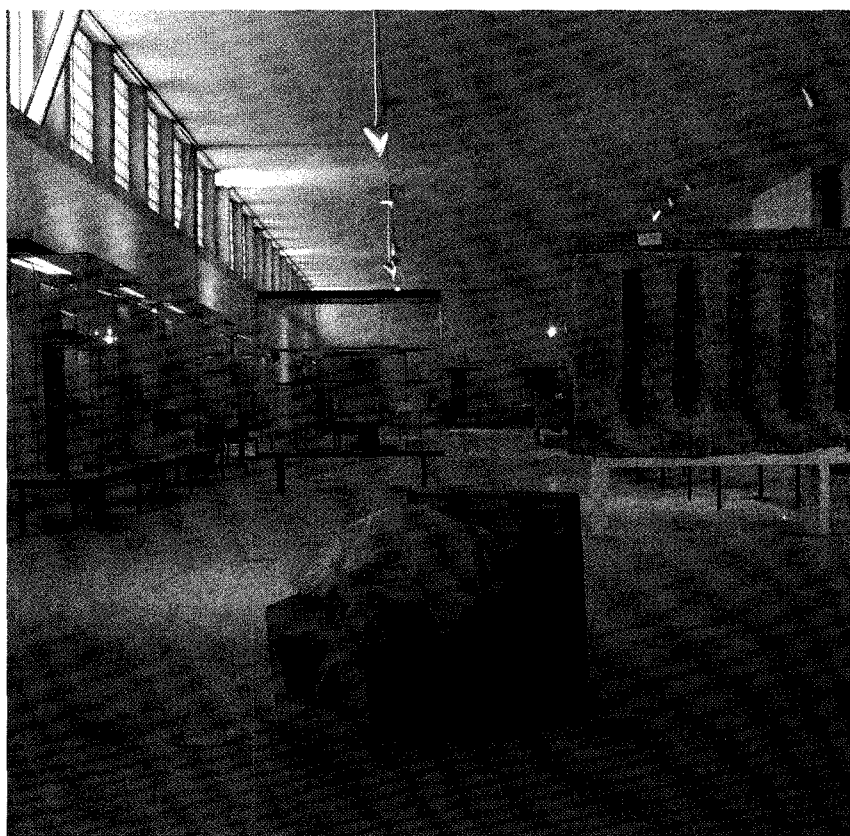
Projected onto the wall above George was an image of what has become a symbol of the museum looting: the Warka Vase, a 5,200-year-old artifact unearthed by a team of German archaeologists in 1940 in the ruins of the ancient city of Warka, or Uruk, near Samawa, a small city 150 miles south of Baghdad. The vase, a yard tall and so slim that it appears almost haughty, was one of the museum's most important holdings; it is considered by scholars to be among the earliest examples of storytelling in art. On it four tiers of carvings, depicting workers, gods, animals, and plants, suggest the complex relationships of rule, wealth, and worship that shaped the world's first cities and the civilizations that thrived there.

Despite George's claims about the extent of the looting, the number of catalogued objects stolen from the museum that April was only about 3,000,

not 170,000. The figure George cited at the conference in London was actually the total number of pieces in the museum's collection, the bulk of which had been hidden before coalition forces reached Baghdad. When I spoke with George, several months after the conference, he explained that he had been well aware of the true figure but felt he needed to obscure it: if he had announced that most of the museum's artifacts had been moved, looters

it turns out, there had also been two phases of looting: the widely publicized one that began with the occupation of the city, and an earlier, secret one that ran throughout much of Saddam Hussein's rule and was in no small measure permitted by the regime. The earlier looting, as I discovered during a trip to Iraq last fall, was carried out so systematically, and on such a large scale, that it dwarfs the thefts that occurred after the fall of Baghdad. Moreover, the April looting may have occurred in part because it would provide cover for the prior thefts.

The National Museum occupies one third of a building behind a tall iron fence in a typically decrepit central Baghdad neighborhood; the rest contains offices for archaeologists and for officials of the Department of Antiqui-



would have searched for them. He also told me about the Warka Vase, which, astonishingly, had been returned.

George said he believed there were two types of looters that April: Baghdadis off the street, and professionals with inside information about the museum. He did not mention that, as

ties, which oversees the museum. When I visited the museum, the floors of the galleries were still littered with broken glass from shattered cases. Near the headless body of a smashed sculpture the pedestal that had displayed the Warka Vase lay toppled on the floor.

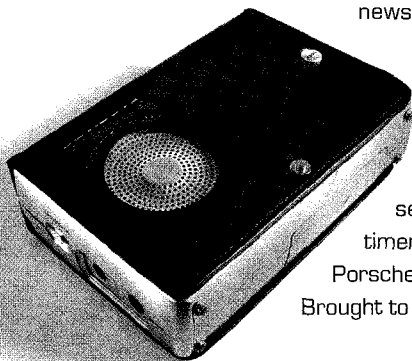
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women congregated around the few desks that remained, passing the time with gossip, since their work as docents was no longer needed. It's hard to understand how they filled their days even before the looting. The museum had been closed to the public for the previous five years, and even before then Iraqis had to bribe security guards in order to enter the building.

Not only the public was barred from the museum. When I asked five archaeologists, each of whom had worked in the building for several years, what they had felt on seeing the looted galleries, they erupted in laughter. They had never been in any of the galleries. "The museum is a completely private place even to us," one of them, a man named Heider Farhan, explained. "To this date we have never walked through the museum. We work in the building. We are on the payroll. We have Ph.D.s in archaeology. But we have never been allowed to see any of what's inside." The reason they have always been given—first by the secret police who guarded the museum, and now by the officials who ran it before the occupation and are still in charge—is a single word: "security."

Each specialist in Iraqi archaeology I consulted while preparing for my trip had told me that if I wanted to understand the looting of artifacts that followed the fall of Baghdad, I would have to understand the dysfunctional nature of the museum. Employees whispered to one another in the corridors, falling silent whenever an official approached. Posters at the building's entrance protested the continued presence of two top officials: Nawala al-Mutawalli, the head of the museum, and her boss, Jaber al-Tikriti, its director general. (Last November these protests were finally heard, and al-Mutawalli and al-Tikriti were relieved of their duties.)

"The close of the museum was for safety," al-Mutawalli explained obliquely and repeatedly during the ten-minute interview she finally granted me, after near daily cancellations. Al-Mutawalli's face is broad and oval, and her wide oval glasses accentuated her hard stare. She was given charge of the museum in 2000; before that she was a noted



cuneiform specialist at the University of Baghdad. She became legendary in the building for her difficult, neurotic behavior. "I call her 'Dr. No,'" one of her colleagues told me, "since all she can do is say 'no' to everything." Her name was paired with profanity in most conversations I had about her, but even more frequently it was paired with accusation. After the looting a set of master keys to the museum was discovered in a plundered storeroom. The keys belonged to al-Mutawalli, who museum employees say kept them in her office safe, which only she could open. She told me that no one else had access to the keys, but she could not explain their presence in the storeroom.

The only person at the museum who was even more widely disliked is Jaber al-Tikriti. An abrupt, unsmiling man with the face of a cartoon villain (all angles and moustache), he was hired by Saddam in 2001, in large part because of the tribal allegiance signified by his name (like Saddam, he is from Tikrit). Every day I was at the museum the anteroom outside his office filled with people who had arranged to speak with him; every day he refused to keep the appointments. "How can anything get done here, much less get solved?" an expatriate Iraqi archaeologist, back in the country to work for the coalition, asked me in exasperation.

**T**he museum hasn't always been so troubled. When Iraq established its Department of Antiquities, in 1923, the government's intent was to increase public awareness of the country's rich heritage. By the 1960s, when the museum moved into its current quarters, it was on its way to amassing one of the greatest archaeological collections in the world.

Then came the ascendance of the Baath Party, and of Saddam Hussein. When Saddam seized power, in 1979, the party was already adept at manipulating Iraq's history for political ends. The Department of Antiquities was housed within the Ministry of Information.

If you were to say the word "looting" in Baghdad, everyone from taxi drivers to teachers would respond the same

way, with one name: Arshad Yassin. A cousin of Saddam's, Arshad became the President's chief bodyguard in the early 1980s, a position in which he reached national prominence; his startlingly fair hair and blue eyes soon became a familiar sight on Iraqi television.

Early in his tenure Arshad realized that Iraq had an untapped resource. In addition to oil, fortunes in antiquities lay beneath the desert sand. He hired archaeology students who were eager to make money—and, like everyone else, terrified of the government—to slip into archaeological sites at night and dig for antiquities, which he sold on the international black market. He also paid art students to make forgeries based on the sculptures they had studied; these were oxidized and buried for a time to "age" them, and then sold as genuine. Still, these were small-time endeavors; Arshad knew that he could make far more money with the help of the Department of Antiquities. Several people at the museum told me he began colluding with the head of the department, Muyaad al-Damirji, a longtime friend of Saddam's who was fired from this post in 1999, not for antiquities looting but for sexual scandals that were too egregious for even Saddam to tolerate. (The two reportedly remained close.) With Saddam's consent, Arshad and his associates widened the scope of their activities. Employees of the National Museum say that objects that were listed and numbered in the acquisition files began to vanish.

The 1980s were fruitful years for looting. A dam was slated for construction some 200 miles northeast of Baghdad, and excavation to save artifacts buried at the site began. As Zuhair Shahr, an archaeologist at the University of Baghdad for many years, told me, "It was the perfect time to start looting—they had the excuse" to remove anything that was found, to protect it from flooding. Whatever objects were uncovered never made their way to the National Museum; Shahr said that no one there paid any attention to the rescue effort. He also told me of a dramatic incident a few years later at the Assur regional museum, in northern Iraq. A Mercedes pulled up after hours one evening and

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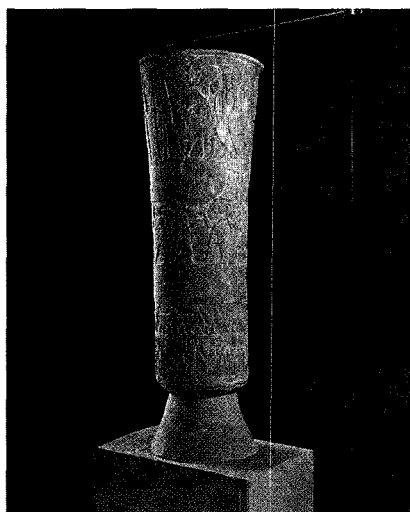
disgorged a group of men bearing a letter from the regime, which said that they had been sent to move some antiquities from the museum. They gave the guards some tea, which was drugged. (This is a strange detail, since the letter would have given the men entry, but it was part of the story when others told it to me as well.) When the guards awoke, hours later, the collection had been plundered. A few years later the museum in Babylon was targeted. As the guards there were changing shifts, a group of men overpowered them and then ransacked the museum. "I believe Saddam Hussein did all of this through Arshad," Shakr told me.

Looting was rampant in museums throughout Iraq after the Gulf War, and Arshad became increasingly linked to theft in the public mind. Saddam, reportedly anxious about his own reputation once the looting attracted international attention, decided to distance himself from his cousin (who by then was also his brother-in-law: Saddam had rewarded Arshad's loyal service by giving him his sister as a wife). He dismissed Arshad as his bodyguard and forbade him to continue looting. But by that time Arshad did not need the regime's help—he retained the patina of officialdom, and had his own network of smugglers and lackeys. Students continued to loot archaeological sites and produce forgeries for him, and he maintained his ties to the Department of Antiquities. In the early 1990s Saddam learned of the continued looting and responded in a violent confrontation that left Arshad in the hospital. According to the doctor who treated him, "[Saddam] told him, 'I gave you all the money you could want, I gave you my sister, what else do I need to do to make you obey me?' and [Arshad] couldn't stop laughing in the hospital bed when he told me this. There was no secret about what he was doing—he had just become so powerful with it all he didn't care."

Arshad expanded his work force to include more than thirty bodyguards, but otherwise he continued much as before. One of his former drivers, who worked for him until just before the Iraq War, told me that he had led

flotillas of trucks full of unmarked boxes around Baghdad for years. Museum employees continued to notice empty slots and inconsistencies in numbering. "We all believed the stuff was taken by Arshad," Heider Farhan told me. "Nobody outside his people could know what was going on. But we knew one thing: that Nawala [al-Mutawalli] worked with Arshad from the beginning of her time at the museum."

Donny George, who has known al-Mutawalli since they were students together and was among her detractors at the museum, told me he doubted this allegation. "Despite the bad relations between me and Nawala in the past two years, I would never believe she would have anything to do with the looters," he said. "While I would say she's stu-



pid, and she can't do her job in a good way, she would never be with the looters." Still, he admitted, "it's true we all had to do things we would never want to do, just to keep our places in the department, to keep [the regime] from destroying everything we had worked for." George wouldn't say exactly what he did or whether he got anything in return. But most museum employees believe that al-Mutawalli was paid six million dinars—about \$2,500, at a time when doctors made just a few dollars a month—for cooperating with the regime during the months before last year's war.

Farhan described a series of incidents that he believed pointed to long-term complicity on al-Mutawalli's part. One day several years ago, while he was

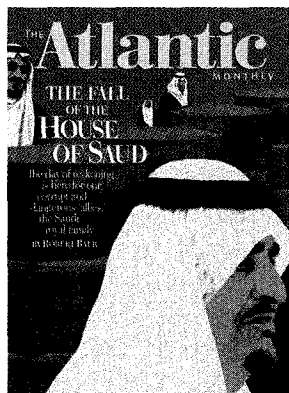
digging at a site near Nasiriya, in southern Iraq, Farhan excavated a vase that proved on examination to be a forgery. Within days he discovered another forged object buried in the dirt. This happened six times, always with Saddam's ubiquitous secret police nearby. Farhan realized that someone had been digging at the site, stealing objects, and replacing them with forgeries, all under the eyes of the secret police. Understanding that he risked punishment, perhaps even execution, Farhan nonetheless took his findings to the museum. Al-Mutawalli and al-Tikriti insulted him, dismissed his assessment, and reassigned him to the computer room, forbidding him to visit any archaeological sites. The man who replaced him discovered and reported forgeries as well, as did the two archaeologists who followed him. Al-Mutawalli and al-Tikriti fired each one for coming forward.

After the April looting, as he waded through heaps of office papers strewn feet deep across the museum's floors, Farhan came across some government documents, which he showed me. The papers detailed the museum's acquisition of numerous antiquities that had never been catalogued; they also contained tracking information for museum objects that had left the country, but included no mention of their receipt by any institution abroad. One of Farhan's friends, another archaeologist at the museum, had signed the documents; Farhan learned that he had done so under threat. "Muyaad [al-Damirjy], Jaber [al-Tikriti], all of them—they were little Saddams who were just carrying out Saddam's will," Farhan told me with a disgusted snort.

In the weeks leading up to the invasion it was Saddam's crony al-Damirjy, not al-Tikriti, who was charged with evacuating the museum's contents. The employees were suspicious, but they were soon assured that everything had been moved to a safe location. So when the war came, they reasonably expected that this time there would be nothing to loot—certainly nothing as significant and valuable as the Warka Vase. In hindsight Farhan and others came to believe that the various events added up. "I believe the reason so much—the



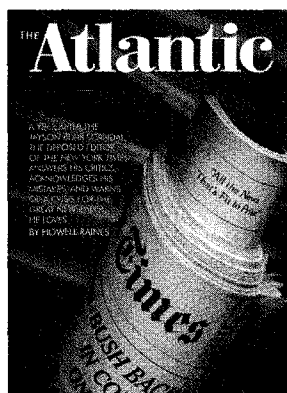
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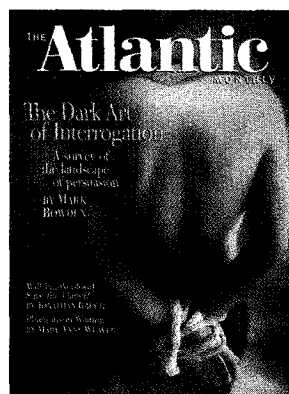
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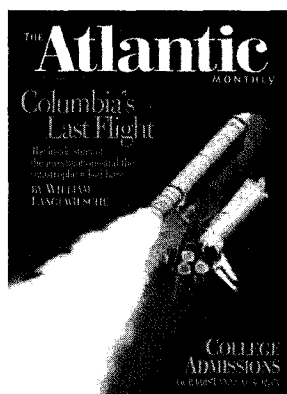
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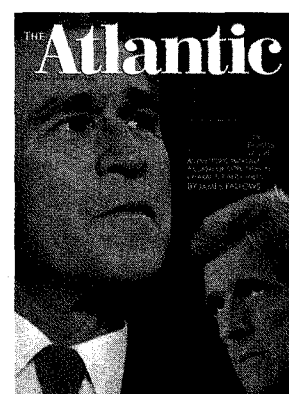
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antiquities, the Warka Vase—was left behind was to cover up for other things the government had looted all these years," Farhan told me. "Even if a committee investigates, it isn't going to investigate which pieces were looted after the war and which were looted in the eighties and nineties. It would be impossible."

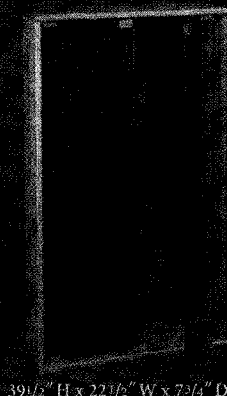
I was told that only a few top museum officials, including al-Mutawalli and al-Tikriti, know where al-Damirjy hid the objects he moved—and that they had sworn on the Koran never to reveal their location. (As a Christian, Donny George cannot swear on the Koran, and for this reason, he says, he was not trusted with the information.) I spoke with al-Damirjy while I was in Baghdad, but throughout our interview he answered my questions with a belly laugh and the repeated assurance (usually irrelevant to the question) "Don't worry, everything is safe." He shoved his hands into the side pockets of his cargo vest and firmly shook his head when I asked him if he thought Arshad had anything to do with the recent looting. "Ah, you want to know about this big conspiracy behind the looting of the Warka Vase," he said condescendingly. Moments later, once my pen was capped and my notebook tucked away in my bag, he grinned widely, leaned in close, and in a conspiratorial whisper said, "When they arrest Arshad, maybe we'll know, no?" He actually winked.

"It was always a dream of mine to go to the museum," Emad Muhammad told me. My translator had seen Muhammad's name scrawled next to the entry "Warka Vase" in a ledger of looted and returned objects at the National Museum. The accompanying address led me to Muhammad's uncle's house, and his aunt arranged a meeting. Muhammad, twenty-three, is a former accounting student and has served in the Iraqi army. Throughout his life the museum had been entirely closed to the public or accessible only by paying bribes that he could not afford.

Muhammad was living with his family in a lower-middle-class suburb of Baghdad, but during the war the

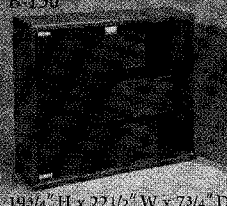
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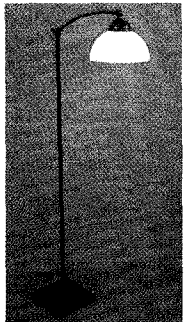
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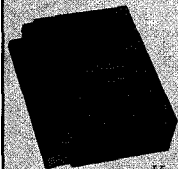
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family stayed with relatives farther outside the city. A friend of his had taken refuge there as well. On April 9 they heard that it was safe to return to Baghdad. Muhammad had a car, a red Volkswagen, and agreed to take his friend to check on his apartment, which is close to the museum. Along with Muhammad's brother, Tahir, and a cousin, Luay, they drove into the city. As they passed the museum, they saw swarms of people entering the building while U.S. soldiers in a couple of nearby tanks passively surveyed the scene. After dropping off Muhammad's friend, they decided to go back and find out what was happening. They joined the mob. "There were plenty, plenty of things in the galleries," Luay told me, grinning. "It didn't look like anything had been packed up at all."

Inside, the three men split up. Muhammad went upstairs to the Sumerian galleries, Tahir entered the Assyrian galleries, and Luay ventured downstairs into the storerooms.

Muhammad's eye was caught by a vase on a pedestal—the Warka Vase. As he was reading the accompanying card, he told me, a man emerged from the crowd, pushed Muhammad to one side, and hurriedly tried to lift the vase. In his rush he dropped it, and the upper portion broke into several pieces. Muhammad ordered the man to step away. He carefully gathered up the pieces and took them out to the trunk of his Volkswagen; then he went back inside. After a few more hours of looting, the men drove the car, now packed with artifacts, to Muhammad's home. They stashed the artifacts under the settees in the living room, borrowed a gun, and went on twenty-four-hour watch.

Muhammad's mother, Fawziya, and his sister, Zainab, returned a few days later. Fawziya was horrified when she entered the living room. "What is this!" she cried, even before ascertaining that her sons and her home were safe. "This," Muhammad replied, "is worth more than one hundred of the house we live in." "I was in complete shock," Fawziya told me, her round, smiling face turning to stone at the memory. "I thought my sons were criminals. I said, 'Take them out of my house.'" Muhammad

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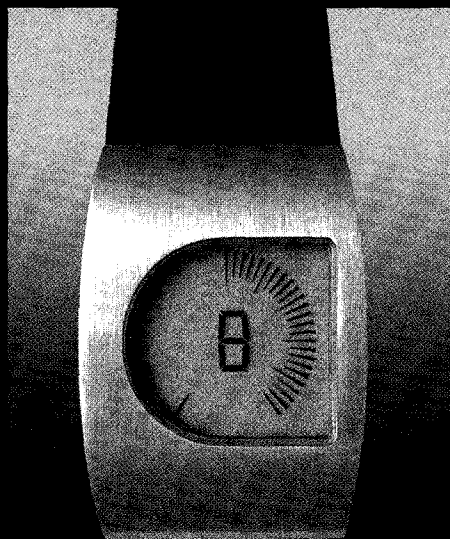


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moved the collection into his bedroom, where he wrapped the vase in an old blanket and hid it under the bed. "I knew at night I was sleeping on top of a million dollars," he told me. But he knew only a small part of the truth. He had no idea that newspapers around the world were publishing photographs of the vase, and that before the month was out the museum's spokesman would be describing its loss to hundreds of archaeologists and reporters at an international conference. He had no idea of the importance and true value of the object over which he slumbered every night.

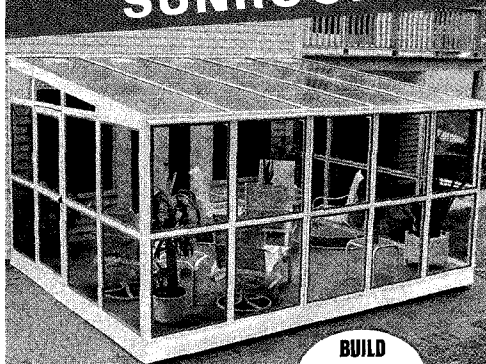
For twenty days Muhammad, Tahir, and Luay tried to come up with a plan to fence their goods. For twenty days Fawziya hardly slept. For twenty days Zainab refused to speak, in protest. Finally Fawziya called a family meeting. Zainab said she would kill herself if Muhammad and the others didn't return the antiquities to the museum. They immediately agreed to do so, and soon Muhammad and Tahir put the vase and the other stolen objects into the Volkswagen and drove them back to the museum. The vase is being repaired by conservators from Italy, and remains at the museum today.

In the meantime, the sort of activity that emptied the National Museum has been visited on some of its perpetrators. While in Iraq I saw a number of wealthy homes that had been looted after the war. Outside one, etched in a marble bar overlooking a swimming pool heaped with filth, were the initials A.Y. This was where Arshad Yassin lived and ran his operations before he fled Baghdad, last year. The walls were black with soot, many stripped down to studs and electrical wires; the plumbing had been ripped away; the rooms stank of urine. The only remnant of Arshad's vast holdings of art and antiquities was a headless marble statue, presumably too heavy for looters to bother with—now a ghostly roommate to the squatters who had taken up residence in the ruins. ▀

*Lauren Sandler is a New York-based journalist who writes about culture and politics. She traveled to Iraq on behalf of the Carr Foundation, a human-rights organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

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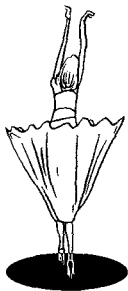
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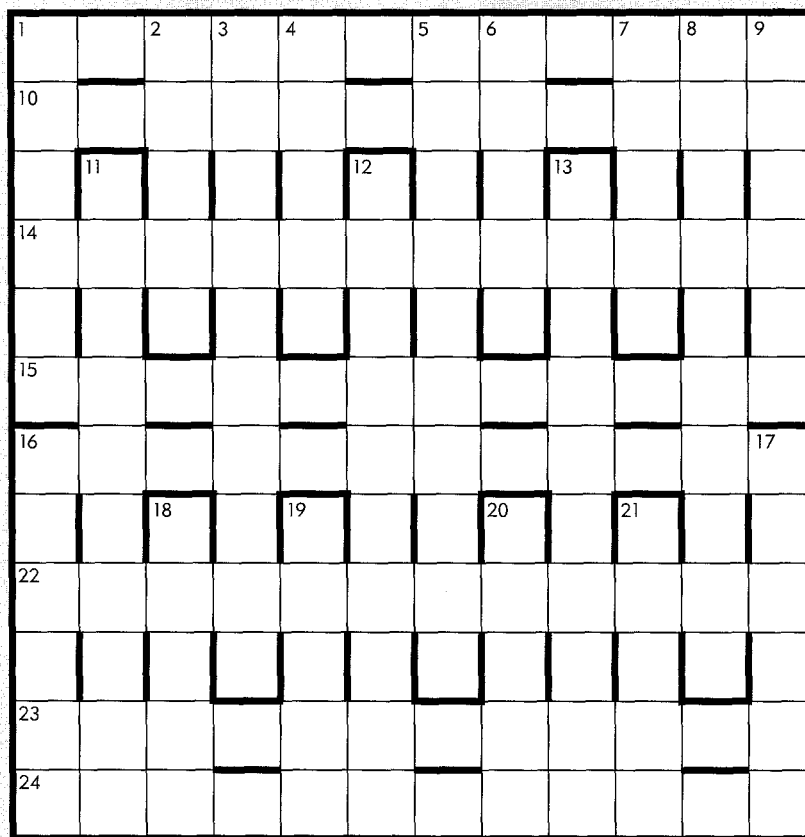
## THE PUZZLER

by EMILY COX and HENRY RATHVON

### Leapfrog

In each Across row of this puzzle diagram, two words play leapfrog as one jumps over the other. For example, if the two words in a row were HELLO and GOODBYE, the possibilities for their placement would include HELLOGOODBYEO (with the first word jumping over the second) and GOODHELLOBYE (with the second word jumping over the first); the jumped-over word always appears intact. Down answers are entered normally in the diagram, but in each Down clue the two parts (definition and wordplay hint) also play leapfrog. For example, the Down word MANGOES, whose normal clue might be "Male leaves tropical fruit" (MAN + GOES), might be clued as "Tropical male leaves fruit" (with the definition jumping over the wordplay portion) or "Male tropical fruit leaves" (with the wordplay portion jumping over the definition). Across clues are normal. Answers include five capitalized words.

Last month's Puzzler solution is on page 172.



#### ACROSS

1. Limited one in leap (7)  
Frog escaped identification (5)
10. Heading west, sign sub captain (4)  
Author flanked by seaman and innkeeper (8)
14. Bright cable cars seen from behind (5)  
I sped or violated stop signs (7)
15. Doctor Spike is not exactly cheerful (5)  
All-night parties gathering in valleys (7)
16. Mere phony yakking after start of school (5)  
Pronouncedly funny part of a wing (7)
22. Streisand role is about right, in a funny way (6)  
Shelter housing an occupant (6)

23. Shoe stink covered by test (5)  
Medieval instrument with bag only (7)
24. Burlesque poke at Plains city (6)  
John and Theodore went on a crime spree (6)

#### DOWN

1. Low sprout developed consciousness (6)
2. Ward Cleaver thrown partly off (5)
3. Wearing out, in a shy way, in bank? (10)
4. Gnats dread cuckoo (5)
5. Top-grade in piercing tool (10)
6. Banjo party with pal accompanier (5)
7. Chic gold bar acquired (5)
8. Absent taunts with roguish motives (10)
9. Top of pail holds in hay (6)

11. A fish bone coated with alloy material (10)
12. Lack of boldness has restricted care (10)
13. Oddly, it's provoking purring (8,2)
16. A person happy to give unhappy lives true pain (6)
17. A model T car company coming back with zip (6)
18. Search through jazz ensemble disc (5)
19. Some weasel comes to a trap (5)
20. Dress *Mata Hari* star with nothing (5)
21. Both sides of street, say, eroded (5)

*Note: The instructions above are for this month's puzzle only. It is assumed that you know how to decipher clues. For a complete introduction to clue-solving send an addressed, stamped long envelope to The Atlantic Puzzler, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, Mass. 02114.*



## WORD COURT

by BARBARA WALLRAFF

ELIZABETH E. STEVENS, of Manhattan, Kansas, writes, "In the past week I have noticed the term *bona fides* in two different sources. In each case the term was used to mean 'credentials' or 'vital' or 'reputation.' I just ran a quick Internet search and found that the term used with this meaning is rampant. Since it is not italicized, I assume it is pronounced as English, so *fides* rhymes with *rides*. When and how did this atrocity get started?"

I'll bet most people who didn't study Latin in school would be surprised that you called this use an "atrocity." The lexicographers who compiled the *Oxford English Dictionary* would understand, though. The *OED* makes clear that *bona fides* in Latin means, simply, "good faith." It goes on to say that some English-speakers "erroneously" assume that *bona fide* (which actually means "with good faith" in Latin) is a singular noun and *bona fides* is its plural; the earliest citation the *OED* gives for the seemingly plural use is from 1944. Bryan A. Garner, the American legal and language scholar, would understand you too. In his book *Garner's Modern American Usage* he says that the meaning "proof of authenticity; credentials" is a "slipshod extension" with an "air of affectation."

Nonetheless, most contemporary American dictionaries present without comment the meaning—and the pronunciation—you abhor. The history of English is a many-centuries-long tale of the borrowing and adaptation or corruption (take your pick) of words from other languages. By now, of course, many more Americans are fluent in Spanish than in Latin. And as far as I can tell from my Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese dictionaries, none of the major Romance languages—languages directly descended from Latin—have retained either *bona fide* or *bona fides*, in its original sense or any other. The misunderstanding and

consequent change of meaning in English is only to be expected.

It seems to me, then, that we should draw the line here: Let's accept that *bona fides* has become a noun meaning "credentials," and *bona fide* an adjective meaning "authentic." But let's fight tooth and nail against a tendency to mutilate the adjective. Uses like the following, from *The Oakland Tribune*, the *Calgary (Alberta) Herald*, and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, respectively, are a little too common to be just typos: "He's a dog with a mission. A *bona fied* working dog ..." "Junior oil & gas companies stepped



back to the main stage last year, becoming *bonified* headlines in their own right." "Jaskowiak ... is a four-year starter and a *bonafied* All-Metro prospect."

R. H. FANDERS, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, writes, "Last Sunday on CBS this sentence was used: 'I was better than *her*.' An hour ago, again on TV: 'I was wondering if this time my dog did better than *me*.' *Than* is a conjunction, never a preposition. It ties two clauses together. The verb is understood in the second clause: 'I was better than *she* (was)'. Am I being old-fashioned? Have the rules changed?"

It depends on the level of formality you expect from TV shows. You're right about the traditional view of the grammar of such sentences. Conjunctions tie

together things of the same kind, including clauses; prepositions attach nouns, or elements functioning like nouns, to clauses; and *than* is supposed to be a conjunction.

But is it "never" a preposition? Consider "She's the one *than* whom I was better." That is to say, "I was better than she"—so what's "*than whom*" doing there? "Than whom I was better" is grammatically equivalent to "I was better than whom," which is grammatically equivalent to "I was better than her." If you insist that *than* is a conjunction, "*than whom*" would have to be "*than who*." But I don't think any of today's authorities on language would make that "correction," and very few from the past 200 years would either. Sometimes, even in formal English (*than whom* sure ain't colloquial), *than* functions as a preposition.

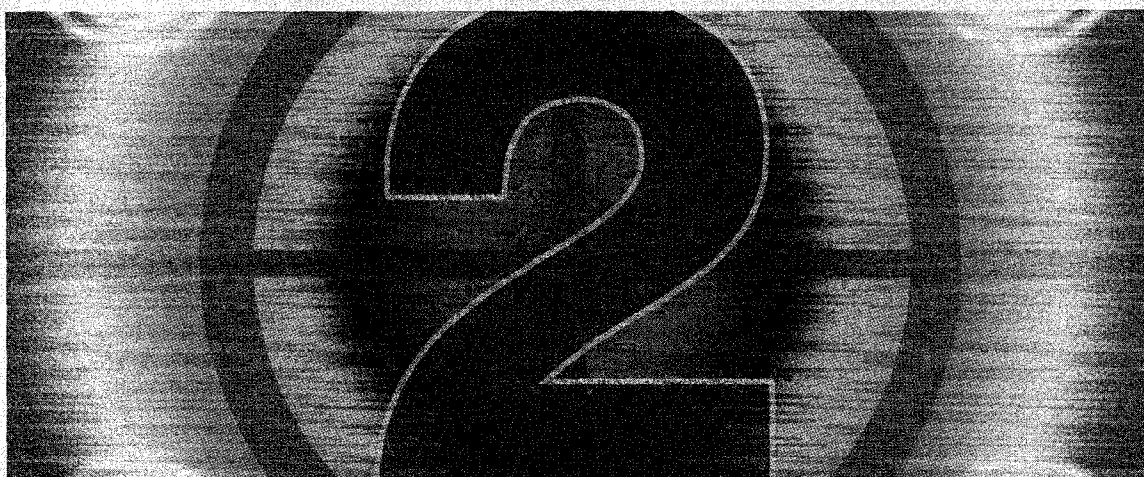
The main reason not to welcome all prepositional uses of *than*, in my opinion, has to do with sentences like this one: "I like her better *than* him." That's clear, no? It means I prefer her to him. If we start allowing *than* to be either a preposition or a conjunction catch-as-catch-can, soon that example will become ambiguous: do I prefer her to him, or do I like her better than he does?

All the same, "I was better than her" can't possibly be ambiguous. And to me, it sounds more idiomatic and down-to-earth than "I was better than she." Maybe the best way out of the morass is to think of constructions like "better than her" as forgivable lapses—like "It's me." And whenever you want to be formal and correct without sounding artificial, fill in the missing verb. "I was better than she *was*" meets all the criteria we might care to impose—except that it's boastful.

Do you have a language dispute? Write to Word Court in care of The Atlantic Monthly, 77 North Washington Street, Boston, MA 02114, or send e-mail to [msgrammar@theatlantic.com](mailto:msgrammar@theatlantic.com). All letters become the property of Word Court. Ms. Grammar is also on the Web, at [www.theatlantic.com/courtrecord](http://www.theatlantic.com/courtrecord).

GREG CLARKE





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EXPERIENCE POLITICS

# Tastemaker With a Sweet Tooth

William A. Mitchell (1911–2004)

BY MARK STEYN

William A. Mitchell never became a household name, but most households you can name have something of his in it—Cool Whip, quick-set Jell-O, powdered egg whites for cake mix. He gave American astronauts the first space-age beverage (Tang), and impressionable adolescents one of the great urban legends (Pop Rocks). Bill Mitchell's inventions are not to everyone's taste. Once, for a BBC show about Thanksgiving, I served Martha Stewart a pumpkin pie with Cool Whip, and she wasn't happy about it. As it happens, Martha and Bill Mitchell have Nutley, New Jersey, in common. In the year of Martha's birth, 1941, Bill Mitchell started work as a chemist at General Foods and briefly lived in Nutley. As he was developing Cool Whip, Martha's parents were developing the anti-Cool Whip.

Business-wise, the former beats the latter. Originally conceived as time-saving substitutes for various elementary kitchen needs, the Kraft/General Foods repertory has multiplied and mutated, and the products that Mitchell and his colleagues developed live happily within a self-contained universe. To make Kraft's Classic Angel Flake Coconut Cake you need a seven-ounce bag of Baker's Angel Flake Coconut, a package of yellow cake mix, a package of Jell-O White Chocolate Instant Pudding, and a tub of Cool Whip. It's like modular furniture: sometimes you put Cool Whip in the Jell-O, sometimes you put Jell-O in the Cool Whip. But it's an all-or-nothing world. It would be unsettling and intrusive to replace the Cool Whip with Martha's recipe for *crème anglaise*.

And yet, if you're at a county fair or a church bazaar and you buy the local fundraising cookbook, you notice how in a relatively short period (Cool Whip, the world's first nondairy whipped topping, dates back only to 1966) Bill Mitchell's products have become the great staples of "down-home cooking" and

traditional "family recipes." For example, in the Tunbridge Volunteer Fire Department Cookbook, from Tunbridge, Vermont, Mary Vermette's excellent "Pudding Dessert" requires for the first layer two sticks of oleo, two cups of flour, one cup of chopped nuts (mix and bake); for the second layer one cup of confectioner's sugar, eight ounces of cream cheese, one cup of Cool Whip (combine and spread on the first layer); for the third layer two small packages of instant pudding and two and a half cups of milk (mix and spread on the second layer); and for the fourth layer more Cool Whip sprinkled with chopped nuts. I made it and ate it in the interests of research, and had such a good time I clean forgot what it was I was meant to be researching.

Still, you don't have to eschew Mitchell's products as ostentatiously as Martha Stewart does to feel that they might not be the best for one's health. They were certainly good for Mitchell's: he was ninety-two when he died, and long after his retirement from General Foods continued to chip in ideas for his daughter Cheryl's company, Creative Research Management. To a chemist, the line between "natural products" and "processed foods" is somewhat fuzzy. Starch technology, which is indispensable to the convenience-food industry, goes back to ancient times. Bill Mitchell's contributions to the science stand at an innocent midpoint between the separation of starch from grain first noted by Cato in 170 B.C. and the brave new world of genetically modified food that so terrifies the Europeans and the anti-globalists. Some of Mitchell's inventions were specifically for children (Increda Bubble carbonated gum), and the grown-up ones are designed not just to shorten cooking time but to extend the sweet tooth of grade-school birthday-party goers through adult life. Cool Whip is a little too sweet, a little too sugary ever

to be mistaken for "natural." By "sugary," of course, I don't mean sugar: looking through the ingredients, one finds nothing labeled as such, but plenty of palm kernel oils and sorbitan monostearate and "less than two percent of sodium caseinate." Who, other than Bill Mitchell and a few other specialists, understands the precise combination that makes Cool Whip just slightly too sweet enough? If you put in 2.4 percent of sodium caseinate, would it all go to hell?

Mitchell was born in 1911, in Raymond, Minnesota, spent his early years on a farm, and then, after the death of his father, moved into the town of Rocky Ford. By eight he was picking peas and beans for local farmers; by thirteen he was subbing for the older melon-packing boys; by eighteen he'd rented land from the American Beet Sugar Company and was growing corn and tomatoes. He went to school during the day, helped with the harvest for American Beet Sugar all night, and slept from 4:30 to 6:30 A.M. After working his way through college, Bill got a research job at an Agricultural Experiment Station in Lincoln, Nebraska, whose lab promptly blew up, leaving him with second- and third-degree burns over most of his body.

His first big success came with a tapioca substitute developed during World War II, when "tapioca supplies were running low," as the Associated Press put it. War is hell. In fact, tapioca, a substance made from the starch grains in cassava, came mainly from the Far East, and with supply lines disrupted, that presented problems for packaged food. You can be sniffy about preservatives in peacetime, but in war an army marches on its stomach, and food is a national-security issue. Mitchell, in developing an alternative to tapioca, helped facilitate the huge expansion of the processed-food business in the 1940s and 1950s.

Some innovations were happy accidents. Pop Rocks began in the fifties, as an attempt that went awry to create an instant carbonated drink. They were a huge hit with kids: when you put the fruit-flavored candy in your mouth, it triggered the carbonation, creating a mini-explosion complete with sound effects. Almost immediately rumors started about their potentially lethal





effects. It was said that if you ate Pop Rocks while sipping a Coke, the candy would react with the beverage and the carbonation combination would cause a tremendous gas explosion, blasting apart your stomach. That was what had happened to Little Mikey, the cute boy in the Life cereal commercials. He'd popped a couple of Pop Rocks while chugging a soda and had exploded in a horrible death. That's how come you didn't see him on TV anymore.

Bill Mitchell and General Foods took out advertisements in forty-five newspapers and set up a special hotline, but the explosion stories persisted. It's apparently true that a shipment of Pop Rocks managed to blow the doors off an overheated delivery truck. But turning your stomach into Bikini Atoll was strictly an urban myth. If there had been anything to it, Islamic Jihad would be bulk ordering.

There's something rather appealing about dangerous food. Instantly dangerous, that is, not cumulatively. America has the most-regulated food in the developed world, yet it also has the fattest people in the world—with

the exception of the hearty trenchermen of Nauru and a few other dots in the Pacific. There surely is a cautionary tale in the limitations of big government, at least with respect to its ability to constrain big citizens. Not all of this is due to Bill Mitchell's contributions to the American diet, but in his last years, serving as *éminence grise* to his daughter's company, he seemed more health-conscious than at General Foods.

When Cheryl Mitchell persuaded her then husband to grow some dahlias on their land, it was her dad who suggested roasting their inulin-rich tubers. This produced a brown substance with a coffeelike taste, which the Mitchells began marketing as Dacopa, a coffee substitute with health benefits. It never caught on in a big way. Mitchell didn't foresee that in an age of convenience foods, coffee would head in the other direction and become the ultimate inconvenience food. In the old days you'd say, "Gimme a cup o' java," and the waitress would slide it over the counter. Now you stand around for twenty minutes as the guy juices up the

espresso, lovingly spoons on the froth, gives it a shot of hazelnut flavoring, sprinkles it with cinnamon, adds a slice of pepperoni and a couple of zebra muskels, and instead of a quarter charges you \$5.95. In its sheer simplicity, Dacopa seems to belong to a lost world. A decaf Pop Rocks latte would have had a better chance.

But in his heyday Mitchell always understood that a successful "convenience food" is a blend of convenience and delight. He never made the mistake of Princess Ozma's scientific adviser, H. M. Wogglebug T.E., in L. Frank Baum's *The Patchwork Girl of Oz*.

He took a bottle from his pocket and shook from it a tablet about the size of one of Ojo's finger-nails.

"That," announced the Shaggy Man, "is a square meal, in condensed form. Invention of the great Professor Wogglebug of the Royal College of Athletics. It contains soup, fish, roast meat, salad, apple-dumplings, ice cream and chocolate-drops, all boiled down to this small size, so it can be conveniently carried and swallowed when you are hungry and need a square meal."

"I'm square," said the Woozy. "Give me one, please."

"You have now had a six course dinner," declared the Shaggy Man ...

"Pshaw!" said the Woozy, ungratefully. "I want to taste something. There's no fun in that sort of eating."

Even devising crystal mixes for space-shot beverages, Bill Mitchell subscribed to the fun of eating. Unlike Professor Wogglebug, when creating food for the rhythm of modern life, he wasn't defeated by it. He's part of the taste of America, the stuff that gets under your skin—from the not entirely "homemade" pies rotating at the diner to the red, white, and blue Jell-O salad at the Fourth of July fireworks. That's how he deserves to be celebrated: take one package of Jell-O, throw in one package of Cool Whip, add Tang, mix, lob in a couple of Pop Rocks, and stand well back. ■

*Mark Steyn is a columnist for Britain's Telegraph Group, the Chicago Sun-Times, and other publications.*

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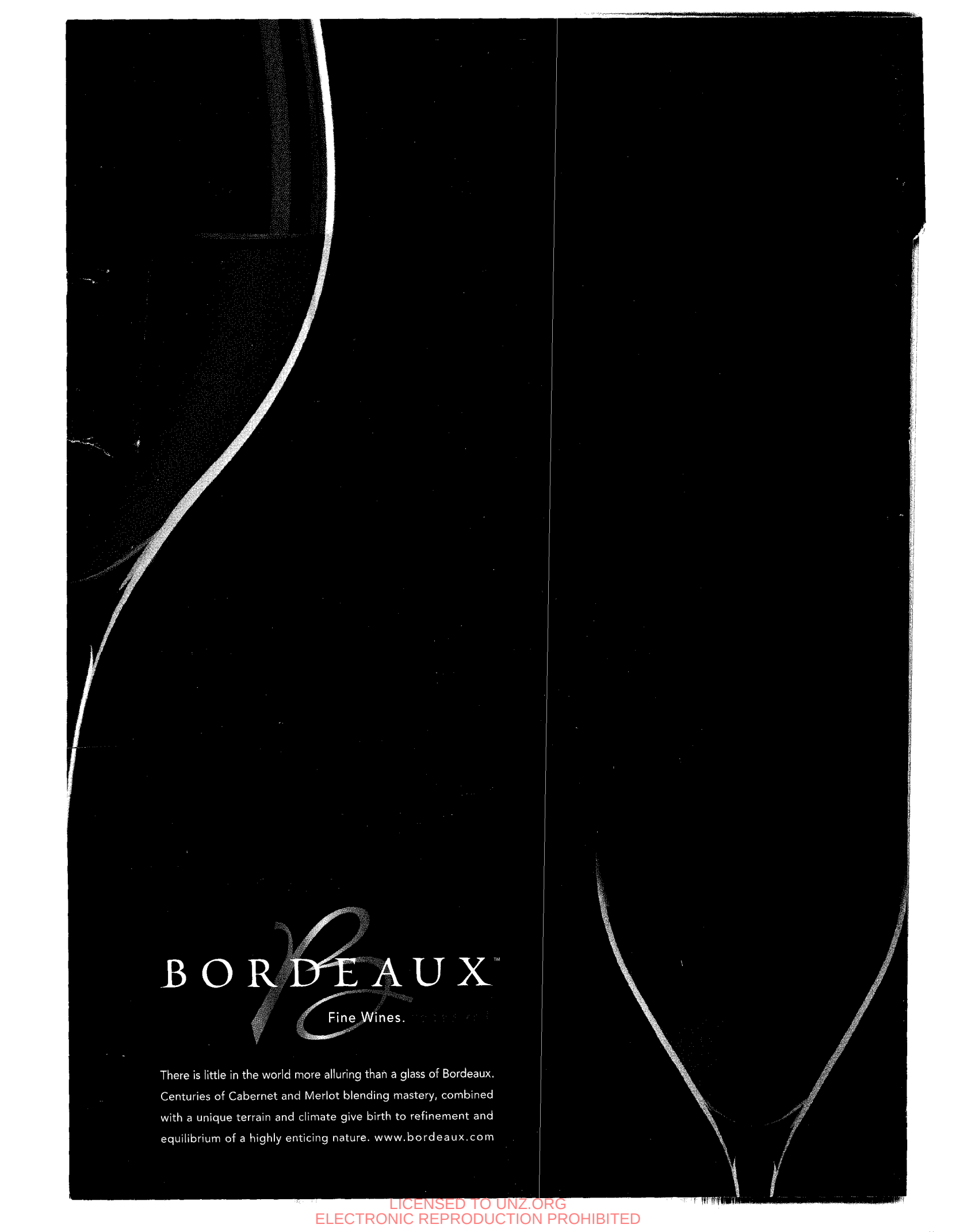
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